Secrets

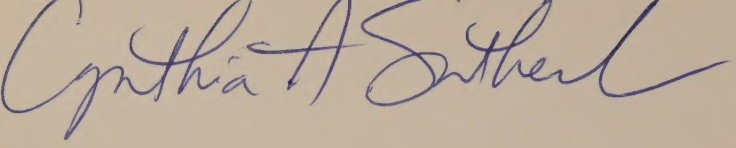
of the

Invisible World

Lesbian short stories

by

Jean Roberta



Secrets of the Invisible World

Secrets of the Invisible World

Jean Roberta

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Dedicated to

all my sisters

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Winter Break

The snow was deep on the prairie. I was hard at work on an essay for one of my graduate English classes, and Maxine was sneaking into my apartment. I was dimly aware that she had come between my page and the light when she suddenly grabbed me, let out a mock war-whoop, and threw me onto the chesterfield.

"Little One," she murmured, holding me down. Her straight, shiny black hair hung over my face. I could smell the oil from her scalp, and the hot, clean, female smell of her body. Her vivid peach-coloured face was slightly flushed. She looked into my eyes, waiting for a response.

As she expected, I tried to push her off. She chuckled, taunting, "You can't get up 'til I let you." As usual, I felt small and inadequate, torn away from my books. She began unzipping my pants, acting the part of the intruder who might get me someday if I didn't learn to keep my door locked against the unknown. Her unspoken message hung in the air: see what you get if you don't watch out? I knew she was playing her favourite game, but on some level it was disturbingly real. I fought back hard enough to free my arms and push her halfway off me, but her crotch was pressed against mine.

Now that I had partly succeeded in fighting her off, I knew I wanted her. I wiggled slightly, and she laughed. I reached up to pull her head down. Her lips met mine in a long, warm kiss. When she withdrew, she made a little moaning sound in her throat that could have been a sound of need, or of pity. Max, I thought, damn you for interrupting my essay and waking up my hunger.

She had entered my calm and studious life one night when mutual friends had introduced us at the gay club. I had only been looking for a short break from Ibsen and modern poetry, but she had insisted on driving me home. Without touching me, she had managed to suggest a depth of desire that fascinated and unsettled me. "Can I see you again?" she had asked, giving me a girlish look from her deep, sad, hungry brown eyes. I couldn't refuse.

In the past three months, she had introduced me to feelings I had barely known before. Through her, I began to guess how it must feel to grow up as the adopted child of a poor family in a tough neighbourhood. Her parents had not been low rent intellectuals like mine. Her parents hadn't even been her parents: just a lonely, childless white woman who had chosen to raise a Metis orphan, and a drunken white

man who had let her do it in an unexpected fit of generosity. "I don't really have a family," Maxine had told me once. "I'm just me."

I had the missionary urge to educate her. When I told her I was back in the university for a Master's degree, she had casually mentioned that she was thinking of starting classes. Since then, I hadn't let the subject drop.

"I don't know what you do," she said with charming awkwardness, "to enroll and all that."

"I'll show you," I said too eagerly, my voice rising. "We can spend a day out there, and I'll show you around. You can look through the calendar and decide what you want to take. You can —" But her attention was wandering, and I felt like a fool. Of course she balked at the thought of spending a day on my turf, being led by the hand. After all, she had become the toughest kid in her high school, and what was the university if not a school? And why would a hotshot saleswoman need to put herself back under a teacher's authority? Maxine didn't ask me this, but it hung in the air.

"If you're so smart," she asked me once, "why aren't you rich?"

"There's more to life than money," I said, thinking there must be a wittier comeback to that old question. "And besides," I went on, "with luck, I might be rich someday."

"Huh," she snorted. What she wanted, she wanted soon.

Meanwhile, she play-wrestled me all over my apartment as a way of teaching me to fight. I realized that she must wonder how I had survived so long without learning such an essential skill. I wanted to tell her that there were different ways of fighting, and that I had learned what I needed to know while I was growing up.

"Do you know what it's like," she asked me once, "to get beaten up by a gang of kids when you're six years old just because you're an Indian?" Obviously her question was rhetorical.

"No," I said humbly. "What stupid rotten kids." She shrugged, as if to suggest that viciousness was a fact of life. I wanted to tell her then what it was like for me to argue politics every night with my father at the supper table before I could escape to the teenage hangouts my parents disapproved of. I had loved to dance.

"Don't you want me to live?" I had yelled at my pale parents, whom I resembled to the last freckle. "Don't you think I need friends? How can you expect me to spend my life studying?" Maxine clearly didn't know what that struggle had been like. Yet here I am, I thought, spending my life studying. And trying to sell my lifestyle to a woman who sells furniture.

Now, wrestling on my chesterfield, Maxine slid her hands over my slim body with determination. "Wait," I gasped. "Let me breathe." I should have known better than to ask her for mercy. No part of me was safe from her reach when she wanted me. Not even my mind or my heart. "No," I said urgently. "Not yet." I didn't want to want her. I didn't want to give in to her, to give up my train of thought just when I had seized on a plausible argument for my essay.

She hesitated for a second, wanting to know what I really meant. While playing the role of a dyke outlaw who rapes the schoolmarm, she was actually very sensitive to my moods. Her fingers searched between my legs, but when she found what she sought, her hand rested calmly on me, waiting.

I laughed. She had already wrecked my concentration and reminded me of my physical life. I wanted her to take me far away from my world of words and ideas. I moaned, grabbing one of her heavy breasts. I found the nipple and gently sucked it, not caring that I probably looked like an overgrown baby. I saw the look of triumph on Maxine's face as her fingers began stroking me.

She was gentle at first, as usual. She had infinite patience in coaxing my body to open. After the first time, she always became rougher and more demanding. Over the weeks of our courtship, her lovemaking was getting fiercer. It was becoming painful at the most intense moments of pleasure.

A shocking word rose in my mind as she lay on me, our bodies rocking in rhythm. Sado-masochism. My girlfriend and I are into S & M, I thought. I immediately denied it to myself, but the feelings that flooded me made it hard to think. After I come, I thought, I'll reason this out.

As soon as our breathing had returned to normal, Max reached for a cigarette. She knew this annoyed me since I didn't smoke, and my annoyance seemed to give her a perverse pleasure.

I jumped up and went to the window. It was a bitterly cold day in January, and snow was falling. Watching the snowflakes, the drifts, and the snow-covered cars and trees helped ease my feeling of humiliation.

"Babe?" Max asked in a sly, tender voice. "Did your husband ever fuck you like that?" I immediately felt feverish, and knew I turned bright red. My short, unlikely marriage was ancient history, and I didn't want to think about it.

"No," I said, without turning to face her. She chuckled. Why had she reminded me of Mohammed? He had been a Syrian student whose visa had been running out when he proposed to me. I had let him convince me that his need for a Canadian wife was incidental to his feelings for me. What a fool I was then, I thought for the umpteenth time. What a fool I still am.

"Hey," she murmured, hopping to her feet. She came over to me, trailing cigarette smoke. "Hey, I didn't mean to upset you, baby. You all right?"

I turned my head away from her. "You don't know what it's like," I said, swallowing anger. "He expected me to be a Muslim wife. I wasn't supposed to have a thought in my head that he hadn't put there. I had to support him, but I couldn't do anything without his permission."

"Okay, okay," Max was muttering. "It's all right now." She squeezed my shoulders.

"He wasn't really into sex," I explained. "With me, anyway. He was into mind-rape." She held me against her solid body, rocking me gently. I felt her pity: poor baby. I couldn't imagine her getting sucked into a marriage like that, or any other relationship in which she was not in control.

She glanced at my papers, now scattered on the floor. "What's your essay about, Little One?" she asked casually. What the hell do you care? I wanted to ask.

I sighed. "It's for my class on Love and Death in the Canadian Novel. I'm writing on the character of the father in Martha Ostenso's novel, *Wild Geese*. He's a pig."

Maxine laughed. "Typical man. A farmer?"

"Yeah," I said. You should be writing this paper, I thought suddenly. You're closer to being a working man than I, so you should know how they think. I immediately blamed myself for being unfair. After all, I thought, Maxine is the way she is because she was once a little victim, without whiteness or maleness or money or books in the home. She had to invent herself from scratch.

"You should start university in the fall," I said. "Now is the time to think about what you're going to take." I could feel her spurt of defensive anger.

"Don't push me," she said, an edge in her voice. Her anger triggered mine.

"Well, when are you going to make up your mind to go?" I demanded. "I know you don't want to give up your job," I said to head her off. "I know it's hard to give up an income. But how else are you going to get an education?"

"Who says I need one?" she growled, really irritated now. "You saying I'm stupid?"

"No," I insisted, backing down. "No, no. You have brains and talent that need to be developed." I was sincere about this. Her amateur carpentry, her musical skill on various keyboard instruments, and her fighting ability had all impressed me as much as she'd hoped. "You need to apply for a student loan," I said quickly. "I'll take you to the place. There might even be some bursaries or grants available, depending on what you take. We need to find out." I said "we" as though we were in agreement.

"I'll let you know when I can take time off work," she said, dishonestly casual. It was an obvious excuse to put me off. "When's the next women's dance?" she asked suddenly.

"The twentieth," I said, my heart sinking. I knew she was going to hit me with something.

"Do you mind if I bring this woman I know at work, Lynn? She's straight, but she knows about me and she wants to go to a women's dance." I felt stunned.

"If she's straight," I said reasonably, "why does she want to go to a women's dance?"

"She wants to know what our dances are like." Maxine shrugged. "Maybe she wants to come out. If I bring her, I'll have to spend time with her. It's only fair. I couldn't just dump her in with a crowd of women she doesn't know. She's never even been to the club."

I felt like crying, and was furious with myself for feeling so hurt. "Who do you think I should go with?" I asked her as coolly as possible.

Maxine stayed calm. "Oh, you can come with us," she said insultingly. "Us," she said, as though she and the straight woman were already a couple. I stared at her, hot-eyed.

"No," I said slowly. "I won't go to the dance with you and your friend. I"ll go with someone else. Or stay home." I knew I looked red and sounded petulant, like an emotional teenager demanding that her boyfriend spend more time with her. I'm probably being a fool again, I thought. If Max's workmate wants to come to a dance, it's kind of Max to invite her. We all have an obligation to help our sisters who want to know whether they're lesbians. We the initiated should share our motherly wisdom.

Maxine laughed. "I was just joking, babe," she said. "I don't want to bring anybody from work to a dance. I see enough of them as it is." I felt dizzy. Was there really a Lynn, and did she know that Maxine was gay? Had anyone in the furniture store actually asked Max about the women's dances? I realized that I was unlikely to get honest answers to any of these questions, or to find out how she related to the people she worked with.

"Do what you want," I said coldly. "It's up to you. Bring whoever you like to the dance."

Maxine's face burst into a grin. She tackled me, pulling me to the floor, tickling me at the same time. "I want you," she laughed. "I want to take my woman to the dance. I love to dance with you, babe. I want to hold you during all the slow dances, and kiss you, and then bring you home and mmm..." She nuzzled my breasts. "You know I won't take no for an answer. You know I'm bigger than you, so you can't turn me down," she laughed. "Poor Little One." I was angrily aware of being manipulated, but I still wanted her. My need for her had a wistful edge to it, like a child's hunger for something she knows she'll never get. Or never get to keep.

"I'm hungry. Let's go out to eat," Maxine said into my face. Her black eyes sparkled. She was offering to placate me with food.

I still felt like crying. I realized that I was afraid to refuse her anything, and I despised my own lack of spine. But I was so afraid of losing her, as I had lost all the others when they tired of me. "Good idea," I said, smiling as well as I could. "Let's go."

We walked into dazzling cold. The snow lay perfect and untouched in huge billowing drifts between cars on the parking lot. The sting of the wind made me cringe.

Maxine drove us to a Chinese restaurant she liked. Over the rice and chicken chow mein, she told me about the oak bedroom suite she had sold during the past week. The bed had been a queen-sized waterbed, and Max suggested that she and I would have enjoyed trying it out. Her commission from the sale had been sizable. She paid for the meal.

Later, she told me she had to go home to feed her dog and get a good night's sleep for work in the morning. I told her I had to work on my essay, so she took me home, kissed me and left.

My apartment seemed large and empty as I sat alone, trying to think. Every sound seemed to echo off the walls. My space no longer felt like my own, although I'd always prided myself on my independence.

"Oh God," I muttered aloud. I am not a masochist, I told myself. I don't want to be possessed, especially by a woman with too many rough edges. I'm not really afraid of being alone, I lectured myself. I have faith in my intelligence, which has always pulled me through.

I thought of going to the university library to work on my essay, but I shrank from the thought of waiting for a bus in the dark and the cold. I couldn't afford to keep a car, nor could I afford cabs very often. I was stuck where I was until morning, although Maxine's smell still hung in the air. Desperately, I forced myself to read.

Maxine and I talked to each other on the phone every day for the following week, but she was strangely reluctant to see me. Her excuses mounted up: the other people at work were taking her out for a drink, her dog needed shots, and she was catching flu. The weekend approached, and she had not committed herself to going out with me. On Friday, I demanded an answer.

"Baby," she said over the phone, testing my mood. "Did I tell you about Charlene?" I froze. Charlene was Maxine's last girlfriend.

"What about her?" I asked grimly.

"She's really in a bad space. She's been drinking a lot and she wants to see me. I really think I should go see her." The thought struck me that Maxine herself had been drinking a lot. I had been afraid to say anything, for fear of sounding like a temperance crusader. Or worse, a nagging wife.

I was silent until all my unspoken words began making me sick. "I'm coming over to your house," I said. "I expect you to be there." I sensed her discomfort.

"I don't think that's —" The uncertainty in her voice was obvious.

"Maxine!" my voice rose. "I'm coming over. We have to talk."

"All right," she said, suddenly calm. "All right. I'll be here."

My journey by bus was frustratingly slow. By the time I climbed Maxine's steps, my fingers and toes were stinging from the cold. Frost rimmed my toque and clung to my eyebrows. Yet I almost welcomed the cold, because it distracted me from the fear in the pit of my stomach.

"Little One," she greeted me, pulling off my toque and scarf. She ran a hand through my hair, and I shivered. "I'll have to warm you up." She tried to pull me close. I would need all my will-power.

"I came here to talk," I said, pushing her away. Tears stung my eyes. "Woman," I said faltering, "what the hell is going on?" She tried giving me a look of surprised innocence. The tears began sliding down my face, still burning-cold from the wind. "Don't tell me you don't know what I mean!" I yelled. "You're avoiding me, you're trying to make me jealous, and I think you're lying to me." My fear was turning to anger. "What do you want from me?" I looked her in the eyes, and knew I was pleading. Hot shame rose in my throat. "I've tried to give you what you want. I really care for you, Max, but I can't stand being pushed around and then —" I couldn't finish the sentence. "It's reached the point where I can't study. I need to pass my classes, woman. It's important to me. I want to help you." I couldn't say anymore.

"Whoa," she said, trying to laugh. "Hey. You're turning into a litle toughie, aren't you?" I understood that remark as a threat.

I was in despair. "I'm not fighting you, Maxine," I said. "Why does everything have to be a fight? I just want to know where you I stand with you." I wanted to touch her, but I didn't dare.

Her expression was dangerous. "You think you're smart, don't you? Just because you know a few long words. You've always talked your way into what you want." I felt sick. "If you'd grown up in my neighbourhood, you would have been creamed! Your education won't help you in the real world, lady." Seeing the look on my face, she softened. "Cup of coffee?" she asked, trying to sound cool. I nodded.

"Look, babe," she said, "I care for you too. I love you, really. But you have to learn one thing if you want to be with me. I decide what happens to me." Her voice was steely. "Not you, not my mother, not even my boss. I'm not going to change, so don't try it." I held the cup of coffee in both hands. I couldn't look at her. "Babe —" she started, then sighed. "Little woman." She tried to put an arm around my shoulders, and I pushed her away. "You grew up in a rich family," she said, as though stating the obvious.

"Rich?" I asked in disbelief. "Rich?"

"There's a whole lot you don't know about life," she explained. "I know you know a lot about books. I respect that, I really do, but sometimes you don't know what's going down." She had quietly poured herself a glass of rye.

"Don't drink," I said grimly.

"Don't push me, girl," she said.

By now I knew the discussion was hopeless, but I kept on. "Shit, Maxine," I said as roughly as I could. "I know an alcoholic when I see one."

"Shut up," she warned me. "If I need a drink now and then, you can't stop me." She paused. "You like me this way." She hunched her shoulders, caricaturing her own posture. She waved her drink at me.

"I don't —" I started angrily.

"Yeah, you do," she persisted. "I could fuck you in the road and you'd love it." I gasped. Then I grabbed the glass out of her hand and threw it against the wall, where it shattered in a satisfying burst of shards.

"Bitch!" I hissed furiously. "Stupid bitch!" I tried to stomp out of her kitchen. "You're going nowhere!" I yelled, glaring her in the eyes. She grabbed my arm, and I almost hoped she would hit me. I would have found that easier to handle. She held me in a bear hug as I stuggled in vain to tear myself away.

"Hey, don't leave. Little One, I'm sorry," she crooned into my ear. The look of pity on her face was unbearable.

"You're going to be stuck," I choked out, "in your stupid life until your liver rots! Who the hell is going to want you in ten years? Who in their right mind would put up with you?" I couldn't stand to think what this question implied about me. "I tried to help you," I insisted.

"Come here," she said quietly, moving me into her front room without relaxing her hold on me. "Come sit here," she said, pulling me onto her lap.

I could no longer hold back my tears. "We can't stay together, can we?"

"No," she said sadly. "Little One, maybe I'll go to university someday, but I'll decide when. Maybe I'll give up smoking and drinking too, but not now. I'm not the one you need. I love holding you," she chuckled, "but I hate the way you put me down with your education. And the fact you're older than me. And whiter." I was shocked.

"I never put you down," I said vehemently.

"You probably don't know you're doing it," she said calmly. I could see there was no point in disputing this further.

"Did you ever ... really care for me?" I asked, hot with embarrassment. I couldn't say the word "love".

She kissed me gently. "I still care," she said.

"Is Charlene waiting for you?" I asked.

"Yes," said Maxine, looking away from me. "I said I'd meet her an hour ago. Don't worry, she can wait. Julie, I'm sorry if I hurt you, but I needed some time away from you. What we were doing was...." She stopped.

"Were you scared of your own feelings?" I asked softly. "Of the things you wanted to do to me?"

"Yeah." She breathed deeply. "No other woman let me go that far," she laughed raggedly, nuzzling her face in my neck. "Christ, woman," she said. "You should have stopped me." I opened my mouth, but my feelings kept me from speaking. "I'm not making it with Charlene," she said, "if you want to know."

"But you're free now," I said, trying not to sound bitter. "You can go back to her."

"I probably won't," she said. "After you." The compliment made me feel slightly better.

We stood up. "I'll drive you home," she said. When I hugged her at the door, we both cried.

Too soon, we were back at my apartment. I knew she wouldn't come in. "When you're not busy," I said, "would you come see me? Sometime?"

She smiled sadly. "Oh yes. I want to know how you're doing, Little One." I'll be the next Charlene in your life, I thought. She kissed me goodbye. The taillights of her car wavered as she skidded away on the icy road.

I trudged upstairs to my silent rooms. I had more papers to write, and I needed a mind as clear and cold as the air outside.

The Ballad of Marguerite

My friend Kathy has been finding excuses to phone me more often lately. She drops *double-entendres* on me at women's dances, though she rarely flirts in sober daylight. She complains about her own plump body and ordinary mind when she praises my looks and my talent. I'm sure she hopes my capacity for love is larger than her deserts, but I can't give her what she wants. My feelings are still pulled in another direction.

For about a year, I've been dreaming hopelessly about a woman named Daria. On the surface, she is a journalist with a full, womanly body and straw-coloured hair. Other women see her as talkative, ambitious, political, somewhat pushy, somewhat feminine. She offends some people by fighting for causes: feminism, the natural environment, the preservation of the Ukrainian language she no longer speaks. She is full of contradictions, but I don't care. I think of her as a precious natural resource that should be cherished and protected.

Of course Daria is not alone in this world. She lives with Eileen, a brilliant and moody musician who makes me nervous. When Eileen performs (not always on a stage), she seems openly and unabashedly sexual. She strikes sparks in all directions and I start stuttering in front of Daria. I wonder if that pleases Eileen, the bombshell. Of course Eileen knows the effect she has on people, but she doesn't know how I feel about her mate. Even if she did, she wouldn't see me as a threat. Daria would never leave a talent like Eileen for the likes of me. I'm safe because I'm beneath notice.

The two of them are remarkably kind to me. They don't need my company as much as I need theirs, so I behave myself. I know that if I should ever say anything to disturb either of them, they could easily drop me from their list. Then I could bite my tongue forever in my lonely apartment.

Daria calls me by my middle name, Marguerite. It's a family name that no one ever uses any more except my grand-mère Laplante and Daria, the great tease. Sometimes she just calls me Woman. I try to control my tremors when she does this: I almost wish she wouldn't. I wonder if that's why she does it. She told me once that I could probably get any woman I want. In a state of shock, I realized that she meant it. But she doesn't know who I want. And what exactly does "get" mean? I think she respects me enough to do anything for me within reason. What I want from her is beyond reason.

Daria also takes the liberty of tickling the back of my neck when she feels like it. She stands close to me when pouring me another glass of wine, her shoulder-length, innocent-coloured hair tickling my face. No doubt, her teasing is a sign of trust and friendship. She would probably feel betrayed if I did half the things that flash through my mind. If I were really a trustworthy friend, I wouldn't even think them. I must be a snake in the grass.

Eileen has hair so red it burns the eyes like a flame. I know she was born under Scorpio, the sign of sex and death. Like me, she experiences reality through instincts and emotions. She hides her sensitivity very well under the masks of a glamorous body and a penetrating voice. Not to mention a hard guitar. I could never play an instrument the way she does.

According to the more traditional members of our lesbian community, Eileen is the Butch and Daria is the Femme. But if Daria ever left Eileen (I shouldn't even hope), Eileen would suffer for years. Daria could probably rationalize her way out of any heartache, and learn to treat the ex-lover like a casual friend.

I know Eileen too well to be fooled by her masks. She flounders in the sea of feeling just like me. Her music, like my poems, comes out of that limitless space. She needs a few hard edges to keep her womanly feelings under control.

One evening when I was lingering over Daria's red wine, Eileen and I had a long conversation. Daria had sipped too much between words, and had staggered to bed. I know that Eileen doesn't like wine as much as she likes butch drinks: vodka and orange, scotch and water, beer. So she was the most sober one of us there.

Eileen moved her shoulders in the sensuous way she does, and began telling me about the time she wanted to learn welding, when she was living with another woman. "Peggy wanted me to learn something with more class," laughed Eileen, as though Peggy were in the next room. So there was a time when Daria and Eileen were not a unit, when they hadn't even met. If Daria had known Eileen then, she probably would have dreamed painfully about her as I dream painfully about Daria. She might even have sucked up to Peggy out of guilt. As I suck up to Eileen by trying to give her a fair share of my attention.

Eileen had never talked to me so much before that evening. I needed to hear her, because she is part of Daria. I tried not to think about Eileen's competent hands in Daria's lush hair, or Daria's lips on Eileen's nipples. Of course they enjoy each other's bodies, and they even let me know some of what they do. After all, the three of us are friends. And they know I couldn't be shocked, so they don't spare me.

I suddenly wanted to know what had happened between Peggy and Eileen. I felt that my future was at stake. So I asked her.

"Oh, we just went our separate ways, that's all. We never had that much in common. Not like Daria and me." Oh, rub it in, I thought. Eileen stretched, and changed position. "She was interested in another woman." Oh really? I wondered whether her girlfriends had a habit of leaving her for that reason. "So I left her. No point dragging it out." No, I thought, no point. When another woman appears on the scene, you have to get out fast. At least you do if you're Eileen McConnell.

"Don't you think you and Peggy could have worked it out? Maybe the other woman was just a passing fancy. Or a friend and nothing else." This is the voice of

little Marguerite, the great conciliator. The trustworthy mediator who could run off with Daria at the first opportunity, never looking back at the jilted lover who would suffer for years.

Eileen snorted. "They were more than friends. I saw them together." Saw them doing what? Was this before or after Eileen's departure? I could hear the hurt in her voice. She's a talented dyke musician, but she hurts like other human beings. She was stung, wounded, cut and burned by Peggy's reckless lust for someone else, whether or not she had ever hoped that she and Peggy would last forever. She must have hoped that. We all hope, against probability, that our love affairs will really be eternal.

Oh, Eileen, I thought, I'm sorry I have inappropriate feelings for the one you love. I promise I'll never approach her. I'll go on being passive and hopeless so you won't be hurt again. I'm really stronger than you, so I'll continue to be femme so you can be butch, Eileen. Whether or not you deserve that position in her life.

Daria wandered vaguely out of the bedroom in a pair of pajamas that made my heart stand still. "Were you reading my book?" she accused Eileen.

"I put it back on the table, honey," she laughed. "I finished it." Daria looked confused. "I'll show you," Eileen offered chivalrously, guiding Daria back to the bedroom.

"Oh, I'll find it," laughed my idol. Smack. I heard that kiss. Did they really think I couldn't? I reminded myself that they weren't really showing off to make me feel left out. They were simply doing what they would have done if I hadn't been there. I might as well be somewhere else, I thought. I should get the hell out. They probably wish I would, but they're both too polite to say so.

"You want me to rub your back?" murmured Eileen. Did she really think I wouldn't hear?

"You better keep the woman company," laughed Daria. *La femme*, I thought, *c'est moi.* "She'll think you're a bad hostess."

"I should go," I muttered, trying to keep the anger out of my voice. At times like this I almost wish I were straight. Really, you two, I could say, I must get back to my husband and three children. Duty calls. As a wife, I could be so condescending about Eileen and Daria to a straight audience. "I know these two lesbians," I would say. "They're real characters. But they're nice." Meaning I'm a good liberal, a tolerant woman. I could be so cool, so dry, and so free from the torture of my feelings.

"Stay awhile," said Eileen, touching me on the shoulder. She wanted to go on talking, so I stayed.

The next day Daria phoned me after work. A rapist had been acquitted, and she wanted to know if I had heard the bad news. She also wondered if I would be joining them in the demonstration against the new power plant, and if I had signed the peace petition. "Yes," I said to all her questions. Anything for you, my General, I thought. She complained about the busy day she had had, but she sounded exhilarated.

"Marguerite?" she asked in her teasing voice. "Have you written any more masterpieces for me to read? Mistresspieces, I mean. I want to read something of yours. I've heard too much death and destruction today. Eileen is practicing. Can you hear?" Daria held the phone so that I couldn't avoid hearing Eileen's guitar. Loud

minor chords. "She needs raw material. She'd like to put one of your poems to music." I almost laughed harshly, in answer to Daria's sweet lie and Eileen's grim chords. I know who likes to read what I write, I thought, and it's not Eileen.

"I can drop something off for you at work tomorrow," I said on impulse. "My morning is free." Daria protested and demanded to know whether I would have to go out of my way to fulfill her request.

"Oh no," I lied. "I have a few errands to do. It's right on my way." I had a suicidal urge to show her an elaborate piece I had written about a thirteenth-century female troubadour who courts a French lady. It was based on a true story. It was also based on my true feelings and Daria's true qualities. I told myself she would never recognize herself in a lady of the French Renaissance. But I wanted her to know what she could inspire in me. I didn't think Eileen would take any interest in my historical romance, so my message to Daria would not be intercepted.

After I had left my poem in a sealed envelope with the receptionist, I began to sweat. My poem is full of traditional metaphors: the lover describes herself as a little boat on an ocean of love and compares her lady's heart to a walled city. Following these passages are terse, mean snatches of twentieth-century cynicism; the poet knows that both women live in an age before the invention of tampax, underarm deodorant and lesbian-feminism. Their smell is rank and their love is doomed. The suitor's love, my love, is doomed. But she has a right to hear my serenade, I thought. She asked for it.

Several days later, Eileen phoned me. "Hello, Woman," she sang in my ear, although she was not in the habit of calling me that. She was not in the habit of calling me at all. When she invited me to lunch with her, I wondered what revenge she was plotting; she might have guessed my feelings for Daria, and decided to deal with me. Then I remembered our late-night conversation. Obviously Eileen now felt that she and I were friends in our own right, without needing Daria as an interpreter. For once, Daria was not at the centre of all interaction among the three of us. How odd. How unforeseen. What a good cover my friendship with Eileen would be, and what a good source of information about my beloved. I accepted Eileen's invitation with thinly-disguised glee.

She must have caught sight of me as soon as I entered the restaurant. Her eyes gleamed. I was flattered, although Eileen's attention was not what I wanted most. The first thing she mentioned was my poem. She seemed to like it beyond my wildest expectations. She wanted to sing it. She also wanted to read more of my writing. I refrained from telling her how surprised I was to find her so literate. As calmly as possible, I asked whether Daria had read my poem. Eileen said yes, and said Daria had liked it too.

I tried to steer the conversation into areas that might yield information about Daria: her Women Against Violence meetings, the peace coalition, the abortion rights group. All the groups Daria fooled herself into thinking she could join without becoming known. I pictured Daria's breasts outlined against a blue summer sky as she interviewed the Conservative politician with restrained sarcasm. "She's worried about her job," said Eileen. "She wants to stay involved, but she's not going to as many meetings. She's been doing things at home."

Eileen wanted to discuss literature. "Daria's been writing a lot too," she said. "Not just articles for work." I had trouble breathing.

"Does she ever write about—women with women?" I asked.

"Oh, yeah. Science-fiction-type stuff. About all-female societies fighting wars with male societies. You should read her stories. Some of her characters remind me of people we know." I felt myself turning beet-red.

Eileen watched me with a look of sexual cunning, enjoying me losing my cool. She wanted me to continue being flustered. She probably thought I was embarrassed at the thought of appearing as a lesbian character in someone else's imaginary universe. She probably thought that I, like Daria, feared exposure.

Oh Daria, I thought. Please write me in as your spear-carrier or your shield-maiden. I'll do anything you ask me to do. Eileen was talking: "Could I use your poem? I'd only need to make a few minor changes." I said yes.

During the next few weeks, Daria always seemed busy addressing envelopes, phoning group members, or writing articles. She had quietly begun working for the party she hoped would win the next election. I had no chance to see her fiction. She promised to show me something soon; she seemed charmingly annoyed that Eileen had described her unserious writing. Eileen phoned me regularly, just to chat.

Daria and I sat at the same table when Eileen sang my poem, transformed by her music. Sung in her voice, played on her guitar, it was an amazing combination of courtly love and sexual begging, the words dominated by a throbbing beat. Eileen's song was something I could never have imagined. I had carelessly given her my words to use as she wished, but I hadn't known how anonymous I would feel when the prima donna basked in the crowd's applause. Eileen had no right to play the doomed lover. That pain was mine, and the strength to disguise it was mine too. I left the hall after the performance with a knot in my stomach.

Daria had said I could come pick up a story of hers and return one of her books at the same time. It was a Sunday afternoon. When I rang the bell, I hoped she would be home alone.

Eileen opened the door and told me that Daria would soon be home from her errands. I let her make a pot of tea while I sat on a kitchen chair. I hoped I wouldn't have to look her in the eyes until she had finished.

"Marguerite? You upset about something?" I had to look at her. I could see from the look in Eileen's own eyes that she was stunned by the pain in mine. I was mortified, speechless.

As if in slow motion, her hands slid down the sides of my face and down my shoulders. I felt myself being pulled up and out of the chair I had thought I would never leave until my cool had returned. Even while Eileen held me, I wondered whether she was expressing mere friendship, lesbian-sisterhood, condescending comfort, or the telepathy of creative souls.

When she kissed me, I wondered no more. In panic, I twitched like a fish on the line. "Don't cry," she whispered. I hadn't known I was doing it. The contact of her body was electrifying. "It'll be all right," she murmured. She was actually reassuring me, and I couldn't stand it. She had stolen the phrase I had so often used with Daria in my mind: Everything will be all right, precious lady. I'll protect you.

How, how, how could anything be all right after this scene? Oh, Eileen. Oh, Daria. Oh me, oh my.

I heard the light footstep half a minute before I heard her voice. "Eileen." That was all Daria said, but the way she said it conveyed the despair of the betrayed. She didn't mention my name. Of course not. Eileen sprang away from me as though to suggest that our kiss hadn't meant anything. Of course. What else had I ever expected? Their love didn't include me; love is for two.

"I have to go," I blubbered, no longer trying to hold back my tears. The shock of reality was hitting me. Our three-way friendship would never recover from this episode. Even if Daria and Eileen separated over this, I probably couldn't hope to get either one of them. It was a question of trust, and that was gone.

They seemed to be suspended in space and in time as I hesitated foolishly, in the hope that one of them would ask me to stay. Neither one spoke. They clearly wanted me gone, so I had no choice. As soon as the door closed behind me, I started crying in earnest. An elderly man walked slowly past, staring.

Silence mounted in my lonely apartment during the following week. I didn't trust myself to phone anyone at all, but I hoped for a rescuing call from any lesbian of my acquaintance. Yes, Kathy, I'd love to go to the dance. Has it really been that long, Pat? Oh, Eileen. Yes, I'll meet you, and no, I won't tell Daria. Oh, Daria. It wasn't me. Let me tell you how I really feel, now that it can't do any more harm. Of course I want to talk. It'll be all right...don't hang up.

Kathy phoned to tell me about a meeting of a new lesbian group that she thought might interest me, and she also mentioned a short story of Daria's that had been printed in a small feminist science-fiction journal several months before, unknown to me. Clearly, these items were not Kathy's real reason for phoning, but they grabbed my attention.

I had to visit Kathy to read Daria's story, a situation Kathy found convenient. The story, called "The Frontier," was about a band of Amazons who had been making guerilla raids on a male-dominated kingdom for a generation. Hera, the leader of the Amazons, had adopted a poor orphaned girl from the kingdom, named her Iris, and lovingly raised her to be a woman warrior, strong but fair. In due course, Iris joins the Amazon army, going to war with banners and trumpets. Hera hugs her foster-daughter goodbye, and proudly watchs until she disappears over the horizon. I was crying in Kathy's kitchen when I finished reading, although I knew that Art should not be confused with Life.

Kathy has been very comforting, although she doesn't know the details behind my tears in her kitchen. She seems to think I'm sensitive and easily moved, and she admires my womanly soul. I see her regularly because I need human companionship, but I can't live up to her hopes at this time.

I've heard through the grapevine that Eileen and Daria are still together. In time, maybe — but I mustn't delude myself with false hope. I haven't heard any rumours about me, so my name hasn't been dragged through the mud.

I'm trying to develop into a cool and sensible dyke, which is not easy for me. I think my friendship with Kathy is helping me keep my feet on the ground, even though she's started to write poetry. She says she needs to express her feelings.

Dreams

"Did you have any dreams last night?"

This is usually the first thing Sarah says when we wake up Sunday mornings, even though she knows the answer. Telling each other our dreams is one of the things we like to do on free days. Her twelve-year-old daughter and my ten-year-old son know they have to keep themselves amused at these times.

"Yeah," I said last Sunday, trying to find words and hang onto a vanishing mood at the same time. Sarah stretched slowly in our big bed, and brought one hand down on my back. Her touch made me tingle. She watched me.

"It was based on the Garden of Eden story, I think."

"No, Robin," said Sarah, who has a background in psychology. "Just try to describe it first. We can analyze it later."

The atmosphere in my head had almost faded away like early morning fog, and I was frantic to bring it back. "I was walking down a street," I said quickly, "on a beautiful day in some other city. The weather was perfect. There was music somewhere in the background." How could I describe the air of that place - air that was warm but somehow moist on my skin? "The grass was greener than anything I've ever seen, except on a poster of Ireland in a travel agency." I thought my words sounded stupid, and I was getting frustrated.

The word 'maintenance-free' floated into my mind. I knew I had seen that slogan in an ad for some tempting appliances. How could any object never require repairs? Despite this, I had the feeling that the place of my dreams was a maintenance-free space, a country where nothing ever broke down or was demolished.

"Go on," said Sarah, her brown eyes on my forehead as though she wanted to see into my brain.

I explained about the maintenance-free environment. Sarah threw her arms around me and guffawed, rolling me about in the bed. I knew she was thinking of the six months I had spent trying to survive as a manager of an apartment building. Looking back, I felt as if I had always slept with one eye open, a wrench in one hand, and a plunger by my side just in case.

"Zen and the art of building maintenance," I said. This was the phrase we used for that time of my life. Sarah's eyes watered as she slugged my shoulder lightly.

I didn't want to be distracted. "This dream had more to it than that. Things grew there." My sense of wonder was coming back. "Things you wouldn't believe, Sarah!

And I knew I was still in Canada. I even think there was snow on the ground, and plants blooming."

"Could you smell them?" I looked at Sarah with renewed appreciation. She is an intelligent woman.

"Yes," I said, surprised to realize it. "The smell was heavenly. I saw a tomato tree growing in someone's yard. At first I didn't think anything was unusual."

"Tomatoes don't grow on trees, dear," said Sarah with a straight face.

"That's the whole point!' I exclaimed. "I went up to look at it, wondering if it was a hoax. But the tomatoes really seemed to be growing on the little tree."

The scene was coming back to me. I told her about the car that glided up to the curb, and the four lively-looking young people, two male and two female, who hopped out. "Is that your tree?" they had called, and I wished I could have told them it was. The five of us stood around it, wondering how such a thing could exist.

"I don't know enough about cross-breeding plants," I told Sarah. "I think I read about a tree like that once, but I can't remember if someone really grew one."

"Anything's possible in dreams. It's all symbolic."

"But I want to know what's possible in real life," I said. Now I was coming to the part that was hardest to explain. "I was horny," I said. Sarah chuckled, and cupped one of my breasts. "It came from the weather and the good mood I was in, and my curiosity about everything. It wasn't really a pressing need. Everyone else felt the same way."

"Who do you mean, everyone else?" she demanded. "The guys who were asking you questions?"

"Two young men and two women," I said. "Each one was a different colour - had different racial characteristics. I knew they all wanted to know what it would be like with me. I felt the same way about them. But I knew they wouldn't do anything - obnoxious. They weren't creeps."

I knew Sarah was disturbed, because I could feel her elegant body stiffen. "You're too trusting with strangers," she warned me. "You never know what they're going to do." She sounded like a rape-prevention pamphlet.

"I do if they're in my own head, Sarah!" I told her. She didn't look convinced. "There were four tomatoes on the tree," I went on. "But only one was perfectly ripe. We all wanted to know if we could eat it."

"You should never eat things --" Sarah started.

"I know, I know," I cut her off. "But this was a good tree in my own dream. Someone picked the tomato, but nobody wanted to take the risk of eating it, so they offered it to me. When I bit it, I knew it was all right. The red juice splashed all over the sidewalk."

"Who handed it to you?" She sounded like the hard-boiled detective in a TV cop show.

"I can't remember," I said. "I don't even know if the person was male or female."

I remembered the slightly husky, suggestive voice that asked, "How is it?" The person might even have murmured an endearment like honey, baby, sister, mama. I related this to Sarah.

"Didn't it embarrass you to eat that thing in front of them?" she asked. This question struck me as funny.

"No," I laughed. "For God's sake, Sarah."

I remembered how I had answered, "It's good!" Meaning, don't be afraid, or your fears will poison you. Be open and fearless like me, and you will be nourished by miraculous fruit.

"Tomatoes used to be called love-apples," I told Sarah. "They were considered an aphrodisiac, but they were also thought to be poisonous. Most poisons are actually good for something, you know."

"Poisons can kill you," she said. She still looked worried. "That man who broke into six houses in the East End and beat up a woman still hasn't been caught, but I can't get it through your head to keep the door locked all the time. Robin, that dream was probably warning you not to accept anything suspicious from strange people. Especially if you know they want something from you."

Irritation flooded through me like a fever. "Sarah -- " I began, exasperated. "Those four people could have been two gay couples. Two women together and two men."

My partner brightened, throwing wisps of auburn hair out of her eyes. "Were they?" she asked.

"No!" I pointed out. "But they could just as well have paired off that way. We all turned each other on. Nobody wanted to hurt anyone." I suddenly realized that that was the central meaning of 'maintenance-free'. I stroked Sarah's hair. "I couldn't wait to get home to you, to tell you my adventure."

"Aw, you're just saying that." She wanted to be convinced. I held her, sliding my hands down her slim, smooth back.

"No, I often think of you in my dreams, even when you don't show up," I murmured in her ear. It occurred to me that Sarah wouldn't choose to go along on very many of my sleep-time adventures unless kidnapped. I filed this idea for future reference.

I realized that most other people would probably interpret my dream the way Sarah had: They would see danger, or a crime in the making. Consequently they would see foolish trust and vulnerability on one side, and cruel selfishness on the other, with eternal guilt on both sides. That was how the story would be passed on. And it would become self-fulfilling. "How could you be so stupid?" is a question I keep hearing like an old song.

I offered my love some tea, and went to the kitchen to make it. I remembered other dreams that had made her nervous. Once I dreamed I became the sidekick of Yora of the Forest, a comic-book heroine I had loved in my childhood. "She's so stereotyped," Sarah had said.

With Yora, who looks like a strong and voluptuous female Robin Hood in green leather, I had battled evil soldiers in chainmail, my trusty sword in hand. Yora and I had rescued a beautiful red-haired maiden who had been forced into indentured servitude as a scullery maid to pay off the debts of her father, an impoverished nobleman in a ruined castle. We paid in gold. The Forest was a place that definitely needed maintenance, but I had enjoyed the challenge. Sarah had wondered how I could regress to

fantasy of that level, but she had been pleased to hear that the beautiful red-haired maiden looked like her. Afterwards, we had made passionate love, and Sarah had jokingly called me "Yora," and her "favourite Amazon." I didn't care whether the thrill was cheap.

Back in bed with tea and muffins, we both braced ourselves for a discussion of Sarah's latest dream. Our kids had left us a note: "Gone to Steve and Shannon's house," so our privacy was almost unlimited.

"I dreamed about Tony," she said grimly. He was the biker who had fathered Sarah's daughter when my love was in an earlier incarnation. Sarah had believed that being a biker chick was a way to rebel against the establishment. "I hope you don't mind," said Sarah. I was touched.

"Honey, you're entitled to your dreams whether I mind or not," I said. "Anyway, that depends."

Sarah's face turned pale as she thought of something. "Skip was there. He's been dead for - six, no, ten years."

"What was he doing?" I asked cautiously.

"What he used to do in real life," she laughed quietly. "Guzzling beer." She paused. "They were mad. Skip and Tony and Bam and all of them. They were threatening to carve some words on a woman cop."

I swallowed my hot tea too fast. "Carve some words? What words?" I asked.

"I don't remember," she said. "I was trying to stop them, but they said she needed a lesson. They were going to carve them across her chest. But there was more to it."

"There always is," I said.

"There was a dog howling in the corner because she was tied up. Frenchy was arguing against cutting the cop, but Tony said he wanted to do it for me."

I rubbed Sarah's back, since she seemed to need comfort. "For you?" I said.

"Yeah. That's what he said." She went on. "There was a tornado. Then the clubhouse caught fire." Sarah began to knead a corner of her pillowcase.

"How did you feel?" I asked.

"Scared," she said. "I felt as if I'd done it. I started running, with the dog and the cop. We ran for a long time."

"Did you get away?" I wanted to know.

"I don't know. I woke up. Then we talked about your dream, so I forgot most of mine."

"Next time you can tell yours first." A thought occurred to me. "Tony wouldn't approve of what you do, would he?"

Sarah laughed. "Counselling at the Women's Centre is not a line of work he'd understand." I looked at her until she gave me a funny grin, as if we were in cahoots on something. "That's not all he wouldn't understand. He wasn't known for his brains, but the man had guts, I tell you."

I gently pressed her flat stomach. "You have a few guts too," I laughed. I kissed her neck. "Just enough and not too much."

"I think I'll go back there," she said. I looked at her. "You can direct your own dreams, you know," she told me. "Before I fall asleep tonight, I can decide to go argue

with Tony, and win the fight. Or put out the fire and rescue anybody who needs it. Or lead my own gang."

I was impressed. "Tell me what you're planning to do," I said, "and I'll go with you."

She looked dismayed for a second, then laughed. "You're so reckless in your dreams, Robin," she said. "If you want to be in my dreams, you will have to play by my rules."

"Yes Ma'm," I said humbly. The thought of my pear-shaped body squeezed into the black leather and faded denim of a biker intrigued me in spite of myself. My wrench would come in handy; after all, bikes need maintenance.

"Come, lazybones," said my partner, jumping out of bed and hauling me up by the arm. "We have things to do today." I remembered the holes in the wall, caused by our kids during some throwing game they had made up. Sarah had offered to help me install the new linoleum for the bathroom floor.

Without warning, I leaped to my feet and picked her up, risking a hernia. She squealed, and I lowered her to the floor as gracefully as possible. "Superdyke," she gushed sarcastically in my ear.

"You too," I grinned. As I went to look for my tools, I couldn't help thinking that we made a hell of a team.

Our Visit to the Old Country

The invitation from Betty came only a month after my lover had stopped seeing me because she preferred one of her new men friends. At the time, I thought I never wanted to meet another bisexual woman, let alone renew contact with a straight friend from my past. However, Betty's letter cheered me up beyond reason. Outside my family, Betty was my one remaining link with the United States.

I remembered her as a child with me in Oregon: she was a dimpled blonde butterball, and I was a thin sallow girl with straight dark hair and glasses. Betty had picked on me because she was bigger, and I had made fun of her because I was more articulate. As little Americans, we had had a childlike faith in things I barely remember now: Our Country, Our President, Our Father in Heaven, Santa Claus and male chivalry. As little girls in the 1950s, we wore dresses with petticoats to go to the movies and watch Rock Hudson woo Doris Day in the latest musical. How little we knew, and how we thrived on fantasy.

Before Betty and I hit puberty, the McCarthy Era tore my parents' network of friends apart. "Annie," Betty asked me one day in my bedroom, her blue eyes round with fear, "are your parents Communists?"

I wracked my brain to remember incriminating conversations. "I don't know," I said, appalled at my own ignorance. "I think they're liberal." At age 11, I realized that my best friendship might be coming to an end. I knew that if my parents were exposed as Communists, no other white people would ever speak to me except foreign recruiters for the Party. I had an awful feeling that I was potentially Communist; after all, I had European ancestors and I liked to read. I was skinny and unco-ordinated, not wholesome and blonde. I could never expect Betty to stand by me should my deep-down strangeness be revealed to the world.

Betty and her older sister Marcia had a divorced mother who struggled to supply them with food, clothing, shelter and parental guidance. While my parents' friends were being blacklisted from specialized professions, the women of Betty's household were arguing with grocery-store clerks over the quality of fish and vegetables. Next to "Communist," "cheap" was the ugliest word in Betty's vocabulary.

In time, our families moved to different school districts, so it was harder for Betty and me to see each other. I began dating at thirteen, and I was a failure at it by the standards of the time. My reputation with the other girls depended on my enticing boys to spend money on me without their demanding anything in return. None of the

boys I knew came anywhere near being that legendary creature, a gentleman. I would tear myself away from the boy of the evening to spring out of his parents' car and run to my front door, feeling aroused, guilty and anxious. The prospect of losing my self-control, my virginity and my reputation gave me a faint masochistic thrill; I could enjoy picturing myself as a "bad girl" in black stockings.

The thought of pregnancy was something else entirely. I could hardly look at a woman's swollen belly without feeling as if I had stared at the sun too long. I was determined not to become a deserted mother, raising children while trying to lure passing men into stepfatherhood. I thought that would be unbearably humiliating, but I was afraid my strongest desires would lead me to hard choices.

Betty was wearing C-cups at age thirteen, but boys didn't invite her out. She became very interested in clothes and the Catholic church. After conversion, she considered entering a convent and becoming a teaching nun. She wanted to help children, she told me, and keep them from going astray. She disapproved of the boys I went out with, and accused me of leading them on. I admired her womanly body, but took pains not to let her know this.

By the time we were fifteen, my father was looking for work in exotic places. He was known as a leftist fanatic at the state college where he taught, and his chances for promotion there had run out. My friends and enemies at school accused me of being a Communist like my parents, who were suspected of brainwashing me with their own wild view of the War in Vietnam. Most of my classmates believed that American troops wouldn't really kill anyone, except shifty-eyed foreigners who deserved it.

The summer Betty and I turned sixteen, I moved to Saskatchewan with my parents, my younger sister and my baby brother. During my first Canadian winter, I sent heartfelt letters and photos of snowy scenes to Betty in the Oregon rain, which I missed more than I had ever expected. I tried to describe the cold to her so that she could feel it too, and thaw me out with her empathy. The letters she sent back to me were all about her classes, her sister, her mother, and her new stepfather, whom she hated.

By the the time we were twenty, Betty and I had stopped writing to each other. Both of us were in college, but I hadn't returned to Oregon for that, as Betty had hoped. Saskatchewan winters still made me feel like an exile in Siberia, but I had discovered a surprising number of budding artists, writers and musicians in high school. By graduation, I had a small, loyal circle of friends that I didn't want to leave.

My parents had joined several high-minded organizations with names like the Saskatchewan Council for Peace on Earth, and I sometimes helped out with fundraising events. My parents and I campaigned for the CCF-NDP, the reddest political party we could find, but this didn't protect my father from becoming known to some university students as an American fascist. I felt guilty whenever I remembered Betty, but I didn't know what to write.

When I was 25, Betty phoned me. "Annie!" she called through miles of wire. I hadn't remembered Betty's voice being so high-pitched, or maybe I had expected it to deepen with adulthood. I was also surprised at how folksy and American she sounded, though of course, I thought, how else would Betty sound? "I just had to

hear your voice again," she gushed, and I knew she was as sincere as ever. "Do you still like to write? I got a degree in journalism and I'm gonna go work on a magazine! Isn't that something? I knew you'd approve of that, Annie. You've been my guiding light." I remembered her explaining her new-found faith to me, an unbeliever. I had a lump in my throat.

After that, we exchanged Christmas cards faithfully for the next five years. When I let her know I was getting married, she reacted with more joy than I felt. When my marriage ended two years later, I didn't know how to explain the situation to Betty. However, I knew she would be moved by a photo of my baby daughter, Elizabeth Jean. My escape from a violent husband had quickly followed the birth and I didn't see how I could mention one event and not the other. Betty was bound to notice that I was living at my parents' address again.

A wardrobe of baby clothes arrived in time for Christmas. It came with the compliments of Betty, Marcia, their mother and Eddy, the stepfather who had become tolerable over the years. Every Christmas after that, a box of tasteful clothes arrived from Oregon for my Jeanie, who would never answer to 'Elizabeth'. She learned to identify "Auntie Betty" in the photos that came with the new clothes. Betty and Marcia both remained single and childless.

And so it happened that I held Betty's latest letter, in the spring of my thirty-fifth year, while my eight-year-old daughter worked on her homework. I had been a Canadian citizen for twelve years and I still voted in every election, as though it really mattered. I had been part of the local lesbian community for five years, more or less. I was no more successful at finding the right woman for my life than I had been at keeping men, but I was well-known as a secretary and newsletter editor for various lesbian and feminist groups. My typing job enabled me to write unpaid articles for leftist, literary, gay and feminist rags on issues that many of my friends wouldn't discuss publicly. I attracted admiration, if not lust, from women who envied my powers of expression.

I had come out at about the time my ex-husband disappeared from my life. Since then, my brother and sister had avoided me as much as possible, especially after they each married. Our parents tolerated my lifestyle, and they doted on their only grandchild. Jeanie and I were reasonably happy.

I could guess one of Betty's reasons for inviting me to visit her in Oregon: She had married a man twice her age and sent me a wedding announcement a few months before. Henry David Small seemed to be everything Betty had never found in a stepfather: he was a widower who had practiced law for 30 years and had impressive political connections. He owned land and houses.

Jeanie was overjoyed at the thought of meeting Auntie Betty, the unlimited source of new clothes. Jeanie had no clear idea where Oregon was except that it was somewhere in the 'Nited States, the mysterious foreign country of her ancestors. Jeanie believed she would see palm trees and movie stars in Oregon, since she had seen them on American TV shows.

The plane ride was excitingly novel for both of us, since we hadn't been in a plane for years. My first sight of an Oregon forest, as we descended closer to the earth, moved me more than I had thought possible. "Trees, Jeanie," I said urgently,

gripping her shoulder. The word "trees" seemed pitifully inadequate to describe the scenery. As a child, I had dreamed of myself as a kind of female Robin Hood mixed with Peter Pan, living with a band of Merry Kids in the lush forest of the American West Coast.

Tears streaked Betty's makeup as she met us at the airport. She was definitely fat, by current standards. For some reason, her shape still comforted me. Hugs were exchanged all around before Betty introduced us to Henry, a tall string bean of a man with thinning grey hair and an air dignity. "How do you do?" he said. "I'm delighted to make your acquaintance." He had the shrewd, clear gaze of a bird of prey.

We snuggled into their Japanese car, and began the long ride to the wealthy suburb where Betty had replaced the late Mrs. Small in Henry's house. The sight of campaign bumper stickers prompted Betty to talk about the upcoming state election. "I couldn't convince Henry to run again," she told us, laughing at his reluctance. "But we go to all the do's. You'll have to come with me to the Republican Women's tea tomorrow, Annie. Henry can take Elizabeth to the zoo." I almost choked at the prospect of being surrounded by Republican Women, but then I realized that I didn't have much choice. Betty was entirely dependent on Henry Small, and like her, Jeanie and I were recipients of his generosity.

Unlike their car (one of three), their house was large, traditional and well-preserved. It had a big wooden balcony and three full stories. Jeanie and I each got separate guest rooms, with our own bathrooms between them. "Ooh," said Jeanie, looking out the bathroom window at the monkey bars in the park across the street. "This is a neat place, Mum." I wondered how she would readjust to our apartment once we returned home.

That evening Betty coaxed Henry to broil some steaks while she made french fries and a salad. We ate on the patio, in the shade of a jungle of green vines. Betty had changed into a brilliant-coloured silk skirt and matching sweater, and she lit two tall white candles in brass candlesticks. "It's so nice to eat out here," she said.

Jeanie was silent with awe. I was relieved that she liked the thick steak she was given, although it was so different from our usual steamed vegetables or spaghetti. On the subject of the election, Henry described the major social ills of Oregon as he saw them. "Do you have a drug problem in Canada?" he asked.

"Not like what you've just described," I said. No, I thought, I have no problem inhaling when a joint gets passed to me at a party. Otherwise I can't afford it.

"It's time for a crackdown," said Henry, looking serious. "The drug trade is big business in this state, and it's not the kind of thing we want to be known for. If a few more of the ringleaders were thrown in prison, there probably wouldn't be as much of the stuff around." I felt strangely angry, considering that I had no strong connection to the drug trade in any country, and I was aware that much illegal dope was dangerous and of dubious quality. I realized that Henry's righteousness was upsetting me more than the content of his speech. I resigned myself to being phony and polite.

Betty seemed to handle her job of being daughter-wife well. She seemed truly impressed with her husband's intelligence, and even with his looks. Sarcastic remarks

chased each other through my mind, but they were superseded by the thought: If she's happy, how can I criticize?

Henry was saying something about the nature of time. Suddenly, he quoted Shakespeare: "Tomorrow, and tomorrow and tomorrow/Creeps in his petty pace from day to day/To the last syllable of recorded time.' He looked at me expectantly.

"And all our yesterdays have lighted fools/The way to dusty death," I finished.

Henry was delighted. "Ah," he said. "I knew our literary scholar would remember the Bard's famous lines." I was flattered, and annoyed with myself for being so easily charmed.

That night, Jeanie and I agreed to sleep in the same bed to keep each other company. "Henry is so serious, Mum," she said. "Is he still in the government?"

"No," I replied. "He's retired, like your Grandpa." Jeanie fell asleep, looking thoughtful.

The next day, the Republican Women's tea was exactly as I had expected. I wore a blue dress that hadn't seen daylight for five years; I hoped the style was classic. The event was held in a large, overblown room in a downtown hotel, with American flags hanging from every wall. The women wore elephant pendants, elephant pins and elephant earrings, and talked about their husbands. Betty assured six or seven friends that Henry was alive and well. After she had introduced me as her friend from Canada, no one expected me to express any opinions on American politicial issues. I probably seemed quaint and tongue-tied enough to pass for a true Canadian pioneer.

I wanted to ask the pink faces under straw hats whether they remembered school desegregation, the War in Vietnam, the McCarthy trials or the hounding of homosexuals before Stonewall. I wondered if any woman in the room had ever yearned for another woman. I wondered how many had been raped or beaten. Don't deny it, I wanted to tell them; I know too much. But of course the character I was playing could never say such things. I told several women that yes, Canadian winters are very cold.

An executive member of the organization introduced a platform of politicial candidates, and an incumbent in the legislature. To my dismay, a grey-suited man led a pledge to the flag. What was I to do? I decided that I couldn't pledge allegiance to a country I no longer belonged to, so I folded my hands respectfully and studied the floor.

Cotton candy speeches went on at length. I recognized magic phrases from my childhood: Our Great Nation, the Working People of Our State, Our Heritage, Freedom and Democracy. So they still believe in those things, I thought, or at least the words haven't gone out of style.

On the ride home, Betty seemed preoccupied. "I always wanted children," she said suddenly. "I've had five miscarriages."

"Oh, Betty," I said, not knowing what else to say. It occurred to me that some of those miscarriages must have predated Henry. Why should I be a mother, I thought, and not Betty? I suddenly had a vision of Jeanie as the adopted daughter of Henry and Betty, heiress to a small fortune. But no, it would never work on either side. Jeanie was a reader and a questioner like me, she was thin and dark like me and

her father. She was Canadian. She would probably lead an unorthodox life and end up in Timbuktu, igniting a popular uprising. Someone would write her biography.

"I'd never want to have children in a foreign country," Betty blurted. I stiffened.

"It wouldn't seem foreign if you'd lived there for nineteen years," I said gently. And you don't even know I've joined the nation of Amazons, I thought.

"Even still," said Betty. "I've been to Europe. I didn't like it." Of course not, I thought sarcastically, they don't make good hamburgers over there. The way Europeans live is *cheap*. I couldn't find anything to say aloud, but Betty had more. "I wish I could give Henry a child," she said, "even though I'm getting old. He's raised two sons."

She drove the car into the driveway with unconscious ease. She turned off the ignition, but made no move to get out. "Annie," she said, turning the full force of her blue eyes on me, "I envy you so much."

For an astonished second, I thought Betty was talking about my currently nonexistent love-life with women. I hoped I had been hiding it well. I immediately recovered enough sense to guess what she meant. "Because I have a child?" I asked. She nodded, her eyes swimming. I protested. "Betty," I said, "your mother was a single parent when you were growing up. Don't you remember what that was like?"

"But we had each other, Annie!" she said. "God looked after us, and Mama remarried. You could find another man, too." This idea filled her with zeal. "You have enough miles left in you to find another husband and have more children, girl. I know you could. You just have to look around. A family is the most precious thing you can have, Annie." Luckily, she was too absorbed in her own feelings to notice mine. "I want a baby so much," she almost whispered.

"Have you gone to a doctor?" I asked, guessing the answer.

"Yeah," she muttered, her contempt obvious. "He couldn't find anything wrong. He wants me to lose weight."

"You could adopt," I suggested tentatively.

"I don't want to do *that*," she said, as if I should have known. "You never know what you're getting." As usual, I couldn't think of the right thing to say. She's so American, I thought, more than I ever was. Something more was called for, so I squeezed her hand, hoping my body language had a familiar accent. Sitting in a parked car with Betty gave me the uneasy feeling of being on a date.

Suddenly she turned and threw her arms around me, the full weight of her body behind the gesture. The blood in my veins turned to icewater. She knows, I thought in a panic. She knows I like to hold women, and she's testing me. Or she wants to elope with me because I'm raising a daughter. Or she hopes my fertility will rub off on her. For an obscene moment, I imagined her mouth on one of my little breasts, her painted fingernails digging into me, reaching for my life-giving cervix.

I did the right thing, more or less. I held her as firmly as possible. "Betty." I rocked her like a mother. "Oh honey." I felt a sprinkle of hot tears, cooling on my shoulder.

She withdrew, red and flustered. "Here I am dumping my problems on you," she gasped, "and you came here for a nice visit."

"It's all right," I smiled, gaining confidence from her lack of it. "That's what old friends are for, Betty."

She smiled back. "I knew you'd understand," she said. "You were always such a smart girl." She opened the door on her side of the car, and I followed her lead.

Over dinner that evening, Henry reminded Betty that she had a meeting to attend. "You could bring our visitor with you."

"Oh, my women's group," laughed Betty. "I almost forgot." She seemed determined to be girlish and vivacious after the episode in the car.

"You belong to a woman's group?" I asked hopefully.

"Homemakers of America," she said proudly.

I turned pale for the second time that day. "But aren't they the group that —" I started. Maybe I've misjudged them, I thought desperately. I had been in the crowd that picketed the hall when representatives of the same organization had tried to launch a chapter in Saskatchewan. "I don't know much about them," I said in despair, wishing that were true.

Henry beamed. "They promote Christian values," he told me. "They believe the family needs to be preserved, instead of 'creative' divorce. They're planning an educational campaign to combat promiscuity and welfare abuse in the ghettoes. They're trying to stem the tide of abortion and child abuse in this country." Damn you, I thought, the curse of me and mine is on your head.

"It's not right, Annie," Betty said loudly. "Abortion is just not right. These women libbers talk about freedom of choice, but what choice does the poor baby have? It's murder."

"Murder," intoned Henry. "It's taking a life." Jeanie's eyes leapt from Betty to Henry to me and back again, as though she were watching a three-way tennis match.

"You don't know what's been happening in this country, Annie," said Betty, as if she really believed I didn't. "It's not like when we were young. Communist groups are right out in the open now, and the schools have been letting in homosexual teachers. It's awful. We tried to stop some lesbian who was running for the state legislature. She lost, and I think it's because we let people know what was going on."

Jeanie could no longer play the role of a quiet, obedient child. "You shouldn't say that to my Mom!" she told Betty sternly. "She's a lesbian and so are lots of her friends!" As she paused for a breath, silence resounded in the room. "My mother wants everyone to have a job no matter who they kiss, and she thinks women should only have babies if they want them. She wanted me," Jeanie pointed out. "But you're not a Communist, are you, Mum?" she asked.

"No," I told her, almost whispering.

"Then why did we go to people's houses with that piece of paper?" she pursued.

"That was a petition about the uranium mine," I explained, trying to ignore the evidence that our hosts had turned to stone. "That was for the peace coalition."

Neither Henry nor Betty was looking at me. For a long, horrible moment, silence reigned. Jeanie looked distressed. "Do you mind if I said that, Mom?" she pleaded, sensing the damage she had caused. I could see that she was feeling some of

the fear I had felt at her age. I remembered a line from T.S. Eliot: "I will show you fear in a handful of dust." Or five minutes of silence, I thought ruefully.

"No, honey," I assured her. "I don't mind." Even though dissidents in Chile, Iran and South Africa are tortured for less, I thought, and in many cases they're probably betrayed by their innocent children.

No one was eating. "I have to get ready," Betty announced to the table at large. She scraped her chair back and ran from the room. I realized that Jeanie and I had almost two weeks to wait before our plane was scheduled to take us home. It was much too long for everyone involved. What if we had to leave the Smalls' house that night?

Henry seemed to read my mind. "Betty has arranged for you to visit her family tomorrow." He cleared his throat. "I wouldn't want you to miss seeing them." He was being chivalrous, even to the likes of me. He undoubtedly thought he was demonstrating Christian charity.

"No," I said stupidly, "we wouldn't want to miss seeing them." The full significance of Henry's remark began to sink in. He would not order me out of his home, but he clearly expected me to find a way to leave as soon as possible without causing any further disturbance. All of us want to avoid a vulgar scene, I thought, and that is actually something we have in common. It's very genteel and somewhat un-American of us, I thought, since this country was founded on conflict.

After the dishes had been loaded into the dishwasher, I asked Jeanie if she wanted to go to a movie with me downtown. Neither of us cared how late she went to bed during the summer holidays, and she had tremendous staying-power. Jeanie replied that she'd prefer to play with the kids from next door she had met that afternoon. I gave her permission, on condition that she come back at once if they seemed reluctant. I wasn't worried about Jeanie's manners. I was worried about our public image.

I withdrew to our bedroom, where I tried to read. In about an hour, Jeanie returned. "Those kids go to bed so early," she told me in disgust. "Their Mom makes them. They all have their own rooms, though," she added, as though comparing their lifestyle with ours. "Now I have nothing to do," she complained.

"Well, don't bug me," I said, suddenly irritated. "Read some of your books."

"Are you mad?" she asked anxiously. "Do you think Henry and Betty are mad at us?"

I sighed. "Jeanie," I said, "they don't understand me. I don't think they have anything against you, but they think I'm raising you wrong." I was frank. "We'll have to leave here as soon as we can, honey. We don't belong in this house."

"Oh," she said quietly, reaching for her comic books. She crawled into bed and curled into a ball. Before long, I heard sniffling. "I'm sorry," pleaded her tiny voice, muffled by a quilt.

"Kid," I said, patting the covers under which she was crouched. "Not everybody has to like or understand us. You know that. It's not your fault." You don't know how lucky we are, I thought. In some countries, I would be shot at dawn and you would be taken somewhere for re-education.

Jeanie has the remarkable ability to fall asleep at will when she doesn't want to stay awake. I was the one who couldn't sleep. I tried to concentrate on a feminist mystery I had brought along for light reading.

I didn't realize I was waiting for Betty until I heard her tap on the door. I whispered to her that Jeanie was asleep, and we slipped out of the room into the kitchen downstairs. Without speaking, she began making coffee.

When she turned to face me, I could see tears welling up in her eyes. "Annie," she started, "you were always so intelligent." She obviously wondered how to go on to the rest of what she wanted to say. "You could find a good husband," she said earnestly. "You shouldn't give up! Think of your daughter. Don't you think she needs a father and a normal home?" Betty grasped both my hands, peering into my eyes.

"Betty," I explained, "I'm happier now than I was before." This was the wrong approach.

"Oh Annie," Betty burst out. "I know you weren't happy with your husband, but you can't let it turn you into one of these hysterical women who hate everything. I know you can find someone to love you." She was holding my hands, unwilling to let go.

"How do you know that?" I asked quietly. If I thought she would consider the implications of my question, I was fooling myself.

"Because you're such a talented person, Annie!" she persisted. "You can do so many things. You're a good mother and you're so attractive." And you've loved me for most of your life, I wanted to tell her. But I knew she couldn't afford to look at her own feelings in such a wild, radical light. She had too much invested in Henry Small, Inc.

We sat down, but she kept a hand on my forearm. She looked very appealing to me, although many of my friends would have dismissed her makeup, her dress, and even her trembling pink flesh as ridiculously feminine. I realized that she thought of herself as a middle-aged wife, yet she still seemed to have the innocence of the mythical blonde virgin that American boys once used to dream of. Not only boys. I thought of myself as youngish and still in my apprenticeship, yet I suspected that to Betty I looked seasoned, my slightly slanted eyes murky with seductive knowledge. Beware the Dark Lady of the Editorials, I thought.

"Henry's a good husband," Betty was saying. "He's so good to me Annie, he lets me do anything I want. I just want you to find someone who can make you happy. Then you wouldn't need to get sucked into all kinds of things just because you need friends. Annie, you'll never meet the right kinds of people in groups that are trying to wreck democracy. What will happen to Jeanie if you get sent to jail?"

So the fear that had been an undercurrent in my consciousness for so long was in hers too. "I'm exercising my democratic rights, Betty." I was responding to the obvious. "And I'm not doing anything illegal." But of course she hadn't really been thinking of my political activities, unless sex is one of them. "It's legal in my country," I said softly, "for women to be lovers."

Betty withdrew her hand and refused to look at me. She was already on her third cup of coffee. Like many other people who think they have no addictions, she seemed

to crave caffeine. "I don't want to talk about it," she said coldly, staring out the window. "I'm sorry, Annie, but I think it's disgusting, especially for the mother of a little girl." I was shocked at her power to hurt me, even though I had never expected open acceptance from her.

I wracked my brain. "Betty, haven't you ever felt —" I started. But she would deny it to the death. I couldn't help thinking of the woman who had just left me. Her image still gave me pain. What did her new boyfriend have that I didn't? A cock and about $40,000 a year, that's what. I deserve an income like that, I thought. "Betty," I asked, "wouldn't you like to go back to work?"

"My job wasn't that great," she said with some relief. She seemed to think we had moved away from the touchy subject of sex. "And Henry doesn't want me to work. I'd like to stay home with the baby." A Christmas-card image of the Holy Family came into my head. I would have liked to stay home with the baby, I thought, at least while I was still recovering from her birth. I might have enjoyed being a dependent woman, if I hadn't needed the strength and ingenuity to rescue myself from a hysterical man and then face my parents' unspoken disappointment.

We're two dreamers, I thought, Betty and I. I laughed sarcastically. "But there isn't a baby," I said bluntly. "Maybe there never will be. Do you want to be a housewife for the rest of your life?" It occurred to me that Betty could become a rich young widow, but I really didn't think that was her plan.

She was angry. "I don't sit around the house all day, if that's what you mean. Some of us get involved in our communities, and not just by waving Communist manifestoes at people and criticizing the government. I have a volunteer job at the grade school once a week and I go to Bible study and I'm on the art gallery committee and Republican Women and Homemakers." She softened. "If I'm not supposed to be a mother, then I must be needed for other things. There are so many useful things you could do, Annie. Henry doesn't understand you," she said sadly. "He doesn't know what you've been through."

"Is he blaming you for inviting me here?" I asked, looking her in the eyes. He knows you must have had a reason, I thought, even if you don't.

Betty wrung her hands. "No, not really —" she said. Her voice trailed off as the sound of Henry's footsteps grew louder.

"Hello," he said cheerfully, entering the kitchen. "I hope I'm not interrupting your little chat. I can't drink coffee at this hour," he informed us. "Do you mind if I make myself a cup of cocoa?"

"Go ahead, honey," said Betty with some relief. He's here to keep an eye on us, I thought, and to save Betty from whatever form of temptation I represent to both of them. I sat for a few minutes, then made my excuses and went upstairs to bed.

As it turned out, Jeanie and I were able to leave the Smalls' house more easily than I had expected. After a nostalgic afternoon with Betty's mother and sister, I went through the phone book, looking for the names of any of my parents' friends who might still be in the city after twenty years. I was lucky enough to contact a retired professor and his grown daughter, who lived with her husband and children in a different suburb. I hinted to the barely-remembered faces at the other end of the phone that I didn't want to outstay my welcome in my friends' house. Jeanie and I were

heartily invited by the grown daughter to stay with her or her parents, who had a spare bedroom.

When Jeanie and I had repacked our belongings and were waiting on the lawn for Henry to back the car out of the garage, Betty took several photos of us. "I'll probably see you before we leave," I told her as casually as possible.

She crushed me in a tight hug. "Of course we'll see you," she murmured, before grabbing Jeanie and enveloping her thin body. We climbed into the Smalls' Ford with our suitcases, and concentrated on the view outside the windows.

Henry was cordial when we said goodbye, and so were the Hopgoods, the elderly couple that greeted us at their door. I knew they would want to hear my parents' latest news, and I suspected that Jeanie wouldn't say anything about my views or my sexuality. As I had hoped, the Hopgoods' daughter had children of about Jeanie's age, and they introduced her to their usual summer pursuits: basketball, fishing and catching frogs.

I met Betty for lunch two days before Jeanie and I were due to catch our plane. We ate in a restaurant decorated with numerous plants, where the walls were exposed brick and the specialty was the salad bar. Betty said she was trying to lose weight. She showed me an article in a women's magazine about a new diet that she wanted to try. Afterwards, we went shopping in a downtown mall, where Betty bought a new outfit on her account, and I bought my daughter a green T-shirt with a picture of a leaping trout over the word "Oregon". Before she drove me back to the Hopgoods, Betty gave me a little silver necklace with a similar leaping fish on it. "I thought you might like this," she said shyly, "after you bought that shirt."

"Oh, Betty," I said. "It's perfect. I'll write to you." I laughed sadly. "I won't give up on you."

"I'll miss you," she said, giving me a last hug.

Before long, Jeanie and I were boarding the plane, a unit of two, a small but subversive family.

"Mom," she asked me in the plane, "am I an American?"

"Sort of," I told her, as I had before. "You're a Canadian citizen, but you're part American, part Cree, part Armenian, a little of everything." I paused. "A long time ago," I said, "when I was your age, I heard a song that said if you want to know who you are, you're a child of God." I knew it was a gospel song, but I couldn't remember the melody clearly. Considering how I sing, it was probably just as well.

Another question occurred to her. "Will Lynn meet us at the airport?" Lynn was my lover who had just left me for a man.

"No," I said, trying to keep the bitterness out of my voice, "but your Grandma and Grandpa will."

Jeanie touched my arm. "I hope you don't feel too bad, Mom," she said. "You still have me to live with."

"You're right," I said, holding her hand. "I'm glad." I marvelled at my good luck in having such a compassionate daughter. We both closed our eyes.

I pictured an ancient green forest near an ocean full of leaping fish. I imagined huntresses in the woods, and mermaids in the water, with hawks, eagles and seagulls calling to each other in the sky.

I sent a fervent wish to Betty's womb, wishing it peace in one form or another. I hoped my brief presence had brought her some of what she wanted, but it was too soon to tell whether I had been a catalyst in her life. Or whether any of us would outlive the social policies that Henry Small and his cronies had supported over the years. My mind's eye held the image of a warm green light, like sunlight on leaves, until the descent of the plane forced Jeanie and me back down to earth.

Coming-Out Story

When I was young, the older generation measured women's souls by their observance of social niceties; and the women in my parents' set were nice to a fault. My mother, Lady Serena, was a hostess of the *grande dame* variety, and she would brook no opposition when her heart was set on mounting one of the 19th century's memorable social dramas. Everyone else in our household became, willy-nilly, one of the *dramatis personae* manipulated by the Author of the scene, who also played the starring role. However, I developed a talent for writing myself out of the script and vanishing like a ghost.

As my parents' only daughter, I was intended to burst upon the social scene like a newly-opened flower at the age of eighteen. Nothing would suit *Mater* but that I should appear swathed in virginal white amongst hordes of titled bachelors, their sensuous appreciation of me well cloaked in courtly manners. Largely to avoid such a scene, I arranged to study art in Paris for much longer than my parents thought appropriate. I was in serious danger of becoming a professional with a worldly career.

The years between my leaving art school and attaining to the age of thirty were tumultous ones. During a winter holiday in Munich, I met Lady N. — to the dismay of her husband at the time — when commissioned to paint her portrait. All things considered, I thought it best to cut short my stay. Whatever others may say of me, I have never been faithless to one I admire, although I have been discarded like an outworn glove more than once. My celebrated friendship with Mrs. Q., the actress, was in a similar vein. Husbands were such an annoyance to me that I resolved never to acquire one myself.

It was nostalgia, not notoriety, that caused me to seek the shelter of my parents' home after my wanderings. I knew I would not be slighted there, and I missed the venerable oaks and beeches on the ancestral grounds I knew so well. Time and distance had softened my memory of my mother's determination.

I could insist that I was coerced into a silly and overdue affair that Lady Serena had planned behind my back, but this would not be entirely true. I am enough my parents' daughter to be both proud and honest. As well, my association with thespians seemed to have given me a taste for drama, and I didn't want to go on disappointing my mother for the rest of her life. In short, I let her convince me to come out.

"But Mother," I had protested when I first heard of her plans. "I'm not eighteen."

She had peered at me with her steel-grey eyes. "You haven't come out into society," she said, "and you must, regardless of your age. You know how I feel about these things, Margaret."

After some deliberation, I had responded with a stubbornness to match her own. "Very well," I said. "If you insist, *Maman*, then you must do it in your usual style. No one on the guest list who isn't in Debrett."

"Of course," said *Mater*.

"This must be done well or not at all," I pointed out.

"I know what is required, Margaret," she replied. "I am not as ignorant of these matters as you choose to believe."

Soon after that, my mother and the parlourmaid, Robbins, addressed dozens of engraved invitation cards that read:

Sir Albert and Lady Serena Straitpath

request the honour of your presence

at the Debut of their Daughter,

Lady Margaret Straitpath.

There followed a time, a date, and a venue.

After these missives had been posted, I tried to control my mounting anxiety. I could not assure myself that coming out no longer mattered, because I knew that society never changes as much as the vanguard would like to believe. The nonchalance of some of my friends was cold comfort.

Of course, I had someone to think of besides myself. My beautiful and sensitive Josephine was appalled at the effrontery of my family. "How could they conceive of it, dearest?" she asked, bewildered. "How can you allow it?"

Her look aroused my pity, but my resolve was unshaken. "My darling," I murmured, "there comes a time in the life of every woman when she must meet society on its own terms. Mother says I will not be regarded as an adult until I come out, and I daresay she has reason on her side for once."

The woman in my arms had pulled the pins from her chestnut hair and let it cascade over her shoulders, the better to disarm me. "But what about me?" she asked in despair. "Do I have to accept your decision and the disgrace that will come with it?" Her blue eyes flashed as she began to get angry. "Make no mistake, Meg," she went on grimly, "this will not be forgotten. If your mother wants to stage a memorable event, she will get more than she bargained for. But if you and Lady Serena want to indulge in French farce, I won't be dragged into it."

"Darling," I was as soothing as possible, "the worst that can happen is that we might be sent to Coventry. And then we can join the other debutantes abroad, as we planned. Is that so tragic?"

"Is that the worst? Is it?" she stormed. "You reckless girl, have you never considered your friends and acquaintances, not to mention their relatives? You must have gone mad, Meg." She flung herself out of my embrace. "If I must be exiled," she said dramatically, "I will do it on my own terms."

"Jo," I begged her, "what are you —?" The nimble young woman was striding across the room, her back to me.

"Goodbye, Meg o' the Mountain," she called to me over her shoulder. "If the Goddess wills, we might meet again."

I ran after her with my heart in my mouth, but she had already taken to her heels. Jo entered the stable, with me in hot pursuit, but she mounted Artemis before I could catch up with her. Brandishing her crop threateningly, she forced me to stand aside whilst she galloped furiously toward a future of her own making.

"Jo," I whispered to myself, tasting the dust raised by her steed's thundering hooves. "Oh Josephine. Why must you be so willfull when you mean so much to me?"

The next day I sent her a note and a nosegay, both of which were returned without a sign of having been touched. In the days that followed, I felt as though I were turning to stone, like one of Medusa's unfortunate suitors.

At last the day arrived. I was awakened by bright sunlight streaming through my thin muslin curtains, and by the sounds of my maid laying out my clothes for the day. When we were alone, I usually called her Tibby, which was short for Tabitha. She was plump and freckled. "Wake up, my lady," she chuckled, briskly applying a clothes brush to a pair of breeches. "This is no day for sleeping." Feeling tense, I bounded out of bed and ran a hand through my cropped, unruly hair. Knowing I was expected at the breakfast table, I hurried through my toilet.

I escaped from my parents' too-rich *petit dejeuner* as soon as I could, and strode to our stables. I could not rest until I had made one more attempt to speak to Josephine.

My mare Boudicca carried me swiftly to Frosthaven, the estate of the Twitcherleys, Jo's family. "Is she at home, Smithers?" I begged the impassive butler.

"Miss Josephine left home yesterday evening, madam," he informed me in his well-modulated voice. "She left no forwarding address."

In my turmoil, I seized him by the lapels. "Are you telling the truth, man?" I demanded. "Or is she just hiding from me?"

Smithers remained unruffled. "I assure you, Lady Margaret," he replied, "that Miss Josephine is not secreted about the premises, and that no one in this household wishes to deceive you. My lady will contact you if she wishes to establish correspondence." The man's habitual look of disdain was more pronounced than ever, but I was not willing to be put off so easily.

"Let me speak to Lord Frostlake," I demanded. "I want to know his role in this."

"The Twitcherleys are not at home," remarked the butler, "and my Lord is not responsible for his step-daughter's behaviour. Good day, Lady Margaret." Had it come to this so soon? Tears blinded my eyes as I staggered down the front steps and returned to my patient horse.

I could have spent the afternoon practising my archery, sketching, or embroidering patterns on fine cloth, but all of these activities would have reminded me of infinitely more rewarding pastimes which I did not want to think of on this day. Instead, I made sure everything was ready for my departure on the morrow.

An hour before our guests were to arrive, Tibby and *Mater* entered my *boudoir* to prepare me to meet my public. Tibby laid out my formal jacket and trousers, with immaculate white shirt, studs and stock. My collar and cuffs were freshly starched, and my boots had been polished. I was suddenly assailed by doubts. "Is this really necessary?" I asked.

"I insist that you be appropriately dressed," said my mother. "If you have no sense of occasion, I do."

"All right," I mumbled, more to myself than to my feminine companions. "In for a penny, in for a pound."

Dressed in my ensemble, I was led to the looking-glass. My gentlemanly attire was actually quite becoming to me, although it emphasized my height and my slimness. I looked like some ancient, androgynous model of womanhood, such as might have been seen before the masculine and the feminine spirits were so cruelly divided and forced into antagonism.

Mother smiled thinly, and held out a small box from a jeweller's shop. "From your father and me," she informed me. Inside was a gold brooch in the form of two linked female symbols. She clearly expected me to wear it at once. "This is all so explicit," I remarked. "Could you tell the guests I was taken ill? I can remain in my closet until they go away."

"You'll do no such thing," said *Mater*. "You've chosen the life of a social deviant, and your father and I feel it our duty to start you out properly." She paused for breath. "I'm sure you'd like to contract an alliance with the right person, if that's possible. You can hardly expect to meet your own kind by chance."

Mater was aware of the alliance I had already made, and she was amused by it. "Really, Margaret," she had commented, "the girl is only a step-daughter of John Twitcherley. As I recall, her mother had a dubious reputation in her youth, and I believe the girl's grandfather had an unwholesome interest in sailors. Not to mention that her great-aunt —"

"Then don't mention it, Mother," I instructed with some asperity. "I'm not a horse-breeder and I don't need to learn her lineage by heart."

"Well, dear," my mother continued lightly, "if you must go to Cheapside to find companionship, you could engage a professional. Hired love causes less grief." I was shocked at the callous turn this conversation was taking.

"Do you speak from experience, Mother?" I asked sharply.

"Of course, dear," she laughed gently. "The days of my innocence are long past, and yours will not last forever. But you may do as you please."

Since then, I had noticed the yearning glances passed to my mother by Ainsley, her maid, and the rather pitying smile that usually appeared on my mother's face in response. Such exchanges made me shudder, although I did not know all the circumstances behind them. I earnestly hoped my honour and sincerity would never shrink so small that I would have nothing to offer another woman but condescension and material support.

Mother and I entered the hall where Father already stood waiting. My brother Gordon was smiling in a Turkish costume that he had brought back from his recent sojourn in the East, where he had gone with a beloved friend. I found the smell of his pipe offensive, but I did not want to start a quarrel at that moment.

The guests arrived in a holiday mood. The other debutantes were dressed, like me, in midnight black. Some wore satin or velvet gowns with flowers in their décolletage, whilst others were in suits like mine; indeed, I thought I recognized the work of my tailor, a skillfull, fussy woman with a permanent squint from the exacting nature of her trade.

A *troupe* of actresses, including Mrs. Q. and Mrs. B., arrived with husbands and admirers in tow. Most of the women wore black in honour of the occasion, or so they would have explained if asked. The Earl of H. was there with his latest mistress. Sebastian Limner of the Royal Academy appeared with his customary look of refined suffering and his Italian secretary. My father seemed surprised when Lord and Lady D. appeared, especially when Lord D. impishly kissed *Pater* on the cheek. I knew that the two men had been inseparable as lads at school.

The evening began with *tableaux*. Two actresses in revealing tu-nics illustrated Liberty defeating Tyranny in a rather intimate, grappling pose. Tyranny was in chains, and Liberty wore a French cap placed jauntily over flowing locks. The half-dozen characters in the background wore ragged clothes meant to suggest oppressed masses. The theme of this dramatic scene struck a sympathetic chord in the breasts of most of the audience. As soon as the applause diminished and the curtain lowered, the woman playing Liberty fell out of her pose and onto the the body of Tyranny, who received her with fortitude. Both women remained in this position until they were roughly pulled upright by the proletarian chorus, who reminded the principals that another *tableau* was scheduled immediately.

Succeeding *tableaux* were: Diana and her Nymphs at the Hunt, Demeter Rescuing Persephone from the Underworld, Hippolyta and Penthesilea Preparing for War, and the grand finale, A Battle Between the Greeks and Amazons. This entertainment was a success, judging from everyone's enthusiasm.

I opened the dance by waltzing with the novelist Mrs. S., who had been living with Miss V. for twenty years. I eventually danced with most of the women present, and I was conscious of my privilege. Alas, no one could replace Josephine in my arms, and I felt her absence keenly. When the fashionable photographer pushed her way through the crowd to capture my image for posterity, I felt that a shadowy form must surely appear beside mine on the developed photographs.

As my mother had suggested, my debut increased my popularity. I received many frankly assessing gazes, whispered compliments, and informal invitations as *billets doux* were pressed into my palm on the dance floor. Warmed and amused as I

was by such attentions, I could not seriously imagine finding a replacement for my beloved, who was fleeing farther from me each day.

I did not retire that night until dawn began to lighten the sky. I did not come out of my *boudoir* until luncheon was served.

In the afternoon I bade farewell to my parents, my brother and the staff, not knowing when or if I would see any of them again. I began missing my family before they were even out of my sight, yet I was determined to create my own life in a country that would offer me more freedom than my own. Most especially, I needed the chance to forget my sorrow. My devoted Tibby offered to accompany me. We caught the boat-train to Southampton, where we took ship for Gomorrah.

During the long weeks of our voyage, I tried to ease my burdened heart by writing verse and sketching the more picturesque of our fellow-passengers. I also made numerous sketches of Tibby as preliminary studies for a portrait in oils. The changing mood and colour of the sea on whose bosom we floated offered me material for sketches and musings. I began a needlepoint cushion-cover showing Aphrodite rising from the waves.

When at last we arrived in the legendary city, our first task was to find a suitable home. After a careful search, we settled in the house I named Villa Diana, and set about furnishing and patching up our new abode. There were some delightful fig and olive trees in our garden, but they grew amidst a wilderness of weeds. These had to be dug up and the ground re-planted with grass and seasonal flowers—not an easy day's work.

Whilst I, Tibby and my new staff were making our dwelling and grounds presentable, I met several members of the large community of expatriate debutantes. Lady Pervita Blunt was my first friend and lover in Gomorrah, and she introduced me to most of her ex-sweethearts. It became something of the fashion for my Gomorrah sisters to commission me to paint portraits of their loved ones, sometimes in miniature on ivory, wood or shell. I spent much time studying beautiful faces and bodies, but the nymph I most wanted to see was far away.

The sea-post was slow, and the arrival of a letter from home was a special occasion. Three months after I settled in Gomorrah, I received a letter from Josephine, informing me that she had returned to Frosthaven and become engaged to the son of an old friend of Lord Frostlake. She went on to say that she and her *fiancé* would be moving into their new house after their wedding in a month's time. Jo would not give me the address of her marital home, but asked me to send a reply, if I would, to her family seat. This diffident request for my response filled me with anguish. I knew very well, as she ought to have realized, that my letter would not be likely to reach her in time for her marriage.

I wrote to my brother, asking him to make it his business to discover Josephine's whereabouts, her activities and if possible, her state of mind, and to keep me informed of every detail. Gordon, at least, did not seem to disapprove of my feelings for Jo, although his own liaisons kept him too occupied to take much interest in mine. Little did I know at the time that poor Gordon was plunged into mourning for Captain M., who had been killed by a mob of ruffians that suspected him of sodomy.

Over the years, I received sporadic information about my beloved. In time, she bore a son and two daughters; Gordon opined that her daughter Sylvia Margaret looked like me. Of course, that might have been his masculine way of trying to lighten the grief of an exile. Although my lost love would not communicate with me directly, I took comfort in such news of her as I received.

Lady Pervita continued to be an agreeable *confidente* long after our fever of the blood had cooled. She was the type of lover one outgrows: the type that requires a younger, credulous and inexperienced *protégée*. Eventually I found her insufferable as a paramour, but still quite generous and trustworthy as a friend. From the time our fleshly intimacy came to an end, our intimacy of the spirit began to grow.

Pervita always told me of her latest conquests, and I gave such advice as I could, based on my ability to sympathize equally with the seductress and the seduced. I poured out my heart to her whenever I received precious news of Josephine, and at first Pervita was the soul of warm understanding.

One dark day, however, my companion grew impatient with my complaints and began to mock my long-suffering affection with a lightness that was truly horrible to me. "Why not forget the wench?" Pervita asked casually, stretching one of her fat legs along my settee with an offensive familiarity. "She's obviously forgotten you." Her voice was cruel. Before I could calm myself enough to reply intelligibly, Pervita went on: "Meg dear, the girl probably loved you as well as she could, but she is clearly not the same sort of woman as you or I. I doubt whether she is capable of a lasting attachment to anyone. Blood always tells, you know. Did you know that her great-aunt had a child before she married?"

As soon I gathered my breath, I ordered Pervita from my house. Her manner of leaving was calculated to further enrage me; as she sauntered out the door, she called back: "Come for tea on Friday, Meg. You'll feel better by then." I felt as though a viper had dropped from a tree-branch onto my shoulder.

I steadfastly returned all of Pervita's notes and gifts until her messengers stopped haunting my doorstep. I missed the company of my former friend, but had little time to indulge in loneliness. Soon after my breach with Pervita, my faithful Tibby gave notice. She and a former cook for Mrs. R. had agreed to set up house together. Both women had saved enough from their wages to buy a small bakery shop and go into business as partners for life.

I had come to rely on Tibby so completely that this news came as a shock. I realized that I had taken her for granted over the years, and that I had ignored the wistful look in her eyes that had called for an answer and received none. I encouraged Tibby to invite her beloved Rose to tea, and I gave the two women my blessing whilst they blushed and gazed at each other over the Wedgwood. I thought Rose bore a faint resemblance to my family.

As my fortieth birthday approached, I found that I was almost vain of the silver hairs amongst my black ones and the lines of character that had been inscribed on my face by the dry Gomorrah air. My reputation as a painter had steadily grown, so that I attracted clients from as far away as Sodom and surrounding areas. I was never without admirers, and I felt I had learnt to accept the things I could not change.

I would not have predicted how my middle-aged heart was able to pound when I received a letter from Josephine! Most of it was too personal for public exposure, but the passages most relevant to this narrative went as follows:

> "Meg, I have come to know that I am not suited for the way of life I chose so long ago. I could never, never forget you and I could never accept the bonds of wifedom. Although I love my children, they are being well educated by their father's people, and they have no further need of me. I cannot expect your forgiveness, but if you will have me, I will board the next ship for Gomorrah. Oh, darling, I cannot describe how empty my life has been without you! I am as little respected in society as a Hindoo untouchable, although my fear of this fate has caused me to behave unpardonably. My sanity depends on your reply."

For several hours after reading these words, I was a woman distracted. My need to hold my long-lost love in my arms was so great that I offended Kwan Yin, my Pekingese, by holding her too tightly. As soon as my mind was sufficiently composed, I took pen to paper to tell my Jo she was as welcome in my home as she had ever been in my heart.

On the afternoon of my birthday, Lady Pervita's houseboy came to my door with an enormous chocolate cake in the shape of her favourite hound. The top was covered with forty candles, and in the spaces between them was scrawled this message in pink icing-sugar: "Many Returns, You Touchy Bitch. Forgive Me?" I found it impossible not to laugh. I knew then that I would lower the drawbridge and end Pervita's siege by declaring truce. I would be generous, and my regained friend would have to eat her words, so to speak.

My months of waiting for Josephine seemed endless. At night, I would sit in a *chaise longue* in my garden, enjoying the scented air and gazing at the bright moon in a clear sky, reflecting that the same moon shone on my darling. Sometimes Pervita sat with me, stroking one of my cats and regaling me with local gossip.

At last a ship from home docked in the harbour and gave up its pale passengers into the heat of the summer sun. I recognized my dearest immediately. As I ran to greet her, I observed that her beauty was as great as before, but of a soberer cast; sorrow had clearly laid its hands on her. The line of the nose and the jut of the chin that were once defiant now looked gentler, as though the maturing of her character expressed itself even in her features. I pressed her to my bosom, and was enfolded in hers.

Jo and I have lived in Villa Diana for many years now. I learnt from my dear brother that our parents passed away at the Biblical age of three-score and ten, give or take a few, and the ancestral hall of the Straitpaths now belongs to Gordon and his young wife Sylvia. My brother informed me candidly that his marriage was largely contracted for reasons of discretion and for the promise of offspring, and that Sylvia was content with such prosaic terms. I often remark to Jo and to Pervita that we passionate souls ought to have been born into Attic society at its height, when love was in fashion. The rest of the civilized world has passed us by, having nothing but property and progeny in its thoughts.

Josephine has become a proficient translator of the classics, and this alone would ensure her immortality even if she were not obviously the Muse that has in-

spired so many of my paintings. Our mutual hope and prayer is that we will quit this earth together, in a final *tableau* of Love Triumphing Over Death.

Editor's Note: Josephine Bolter and Lady Margaret Straitpath were drowned together in a boating accident during a storm at sea. Tabitha Parker inherited Villa Diana, which was eventually destroyed during the 1942 bombing of Gomorrah. Most of Lady Margaret's paintings are still in private collections throughout the world.

In England, ownership of Straitpath Manor passed to Lady Margaret's nephew (and Mrs. Bolter's grandson), Sir Rigid Straitpath. With government funding, Sir Rigid turned the estate into a nursing home for terminal deviants. In his words, "We are lucky to live in an age when medical science can work miracles my poor ancestors would never have dreamt of. However, when modern forms of therapy are insufficient, isolation is still the only treatment that is in the interests of society and of the patients themselves."

After Sir Rigid's death in 1975, the house was bought by a coalition including the Lady Margaret Society, the Women's Shelter Association and Daughters of Josephine. Squatters already living on the premises were allowed to stay, and the house was run as a co-op. The first annual Debutante Ball, organized by the Straitpath House Board of Directors to raise funds for renovations, was held on the anniversary of Lady Margaret's debut. Most of the women at that first ball wore black, and many wore jewellery and even ink-drawn tattoos in the shape of a hunting hound, Lady Margaret's symbol. The crowd was so large and boisterous that many were unable to fit into the hall. This situation gave rise to the tradition of revellers running up and down the streets arm-in-arm.

Sleeping residents in the area have reported being awakened during the ball by the Lady Margaret Howl, which is said to strike fear into all conventional souls, and courage into all women who follow their desires.

Glossary

Cheapside: (English) an area of London, England, traditionally known for its street vendors.

Coventry, sent to: Ostracized, not spoken to.

Debrett: shortened form of Debrett's Peerage and Baronetage. From the preface of the 1985 edition, edited by Charles Kidd and David Williamson: "For nearly 200 years Debrett has been a household word, but its origins are older than this...The direct ancestor of Debrett's Peerage was the New Peerage or the Present State of Nobility in England, Scotland and Ireland, first published in 1769. Before the third

edition was brought out in 1784, John Debrett had taken over the business. In 1802, with the issue of the fifth edition, he changed the title to Debrett's Correct Peerage. The name of Debrett has remained ever since."

Hippolyta: (Greek) according to legend, a queen of the Amazons, a tribe of women warriors living near the Black Sea, defeated by the Athenian Greeks. Hippolyta is said to have been captured, then forced or persuaded to marry Theseus, king of Athens. (This wedding forms the framework for Shakespeare's comedy, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*).

Kwan Yin: Chinese goddess of mercy.

thespians: (Greek) actors; literally, "pertaining to Thespis (a Greek poet of the sixth century B.C.)."

three-score-and-ten: Seventy, the number of years an average person can expect to live, according to the Bible.

A Magnet and a Nail

I was fifteen when the woman of my dreams came to my home town, and I saw her for the first time. In those days, I thought I could never find a woman who was still a tomboy at my age or older, until I saw her on the stage in her red leather jacket with all the studs. It was Kim Rainbow, the singer I'd been listening to on tape all summer. Her hair was reddish-gold and her eyes were green, so deep you could drown in them. I honestly felt as though I might faint in my seat.

Just as I hoped, she sang "Wanting You." It's such a beautiful slow ballad, and I wished she were singing it to me. She looked out over the crowd, and for a moment our eyes met. I was electrified, and surprised at the loneliness I felt in her eyes. I realized that it must be hard for a woman like Kim to meet her match, since very few people have that much talent. She must have been disappointed in other people over and over again, but she still sang that song as if she were singing it to every person in the audience. By the time she was finished, I had tears in my eyes.

After I got home, I couldn't sleep. I sat up late, writing her this letter:

Dear Ms. Rainbow (I wish I could call you Kim),

I know you will think I'm very forward, but I want to let you know how one fan reacted to your concert in Edmonton on August 15. I know you sang from the heart, and I was so moved I just can't express it. I want you to know you are not alone, even if you feel that way sometimes.

You probably get letters like this all the time, but if there is anything I can ever do for you, please let me know. I can see you are a strong person and you can take care of yourself, but that doesn't stop fans like me from wanting to take care of you! I would do anything for you.

I play a guitar too. I have golden-brown hair, and friends say I am attractive. My mother and stepfather have a ranch where I visit sometimes and ride the horses. Riding is something I love to do, and I bet you are the same. (Or you would love it if you tried it.) I think all freedom-loving women like horses and wide-open space.

The country is very beautiful where my mother lives and I'm sure you would like to visit there. I live with my father and stepmother in town.

I sometimes write articles for my school paper, and I would like to write one about you if I had enough information about you. I think many of the girls in my school need bet-

ter role models to look up to, and they need to know that women don't need men to hang onto. After one of your concerts, every woman in the audience walks a little taller.

You can rely on my friendship.

Love, Sue Wiley

After having written this letter, I was so embarrassed that I put it away and didn't look at it for a month. When I took it out again, I typed it on my Dad's typewriter, then decided that a typed letter was too impersonal, so I rewrote it as neatly as I could on my stationery with butterflies at the top. Before I could change my mind, I mailed it to Kim in care of her company, Fair Weather Recordings.

During the next few months, I agonized over my letter to Kim. I wondered whether she ever received it, and whether she thought I had a lot of nerve. I was a little disappointed that she never sent an answer, but then I hadn't asked her to write back. I had a strong feeling that she was coming closer to me, but I didn't know how that would happen.

I started high school in the fall, and that was a big change in my life. Philosophy was my hardest class, and I wracked my brains over it. For a break, I read Mary Wollstonecraft, Kate Millet, Rita Mae Brown and Margaret Atwood. I admire all those women a lot, but their words couldn't replace the image of Kim in my thoughts.

I read all the information I could get about her. I found out she was born October 3, which makes sense because she has an unusual voice, and that's a Libra characteristic. She's a perfect size 7 and 5'7" tall. I really wanted to know whether she loved women, but I didn't find that out until I met Karen Vasily.

After several months of reading ads in the university newspaper, I went to a meeting of the gay students' group there. I didn't really think of myself as a lesbian, but I was curious about them. Karen was the most talkative person in the room, and even the men seemed to look up to her. She seemed somewhat cold to me at first, but after the meeting, I went out of my way to talk to her. After awhile, she warmed up enough to invite me out with the other lesbians.

Karen and her girlfriend Diane were the unofficial leaders of the gay women on campus. Karen was a short, plump, dark woman who came back to school after holding several interesting jobs, including sound technician with a women's rock band in Vancouver. Diane was gorgeous and slim, with thick brown hair down her back. She was majoring in drama, and I thought she'd make it as an actress.

You could see that neither Karen nor Diane would leave the other one for the likes of me, but they were willing to be friends, and I needed that. The most exciting thing about those two women for me was that they both knew Kim Rainbow from Karen's Vancouver days. I had certainly picked the right crowd to hang out with.

"Kim wasn't really glamourous then," Karen told me when she was describing the West Coast scene of eight years before. "She sang in some grungy little bars," she laughed. "Everyone has to do that when they're getting started." I really wished I had known Kim when she was getting started. I'm sure I could have helped her, though Karen told me that Kim was famous for her bad moods in those days.

"I don't think she's changed much," Karen warned me. "Sometimes she just has to get away from everyone in her life because people drive her crazy." I couldn't blame Kim for that. People drive me crazy too.

"Well, Mona has to deal with that now," said Diane. My heart sank when Karen told me Mona Allsuch is Kim's current girlfriend, and that she plans to change her name to Rainbow. I wondered how Mona could possibly meet Kim's needs, and I knew Kim must still be lonely.

I was surprised to hear that Karen had been Kim's girlfriend for awhile in those early days. "It was years ago," said Karen, obviously wondering how much to tell me, "but it hurts to get dumped that way by someone who wants to be with someone else."

"Kim didn't really dump you, did she?" I asked. I didn't like the sound of that word.

"When she changes her mind, she changes her mind," said Karen.

I tried to explain to her that someone like Kim Rainbow has the burden of a special gift. An artist like her can't fit in with most other people, including other women in the music business. I think Karen thought I was presumptuous, which wasn't my intention. I didn't think less of Karen because Kim lost interest in her. If I were in Karen's place, I would feel honoured that Kim Rainbow had chosen me even for a night, and I would cherish my memories.

By Christmas time, I was behind in all my classes. Karen and Diane seemed really concerned about my marks, but I wished they wouldn't. I tried to explain to them that some subjects just didn't seem relevant to life. School in general wasn't as interesting as I had expected.

By January, I was very depressed. I could get into bars, and I started sneaking out for beers with Karen and Diane's friend Kathy Bennett, who liked to be called by her last name. Bennett wasn't a student, and although she lived on welfare, she always seemed to have money for booze. I knew I should spend more time studying and less drinking, but there didn't seem to be any point in it.

When Karen told me that Kim Rainbow was coming to our town, I was ecstatic. I couldn't believe I was about to meet her in the flesh! I wondered whether the gap between our ages would be a problem, but I figured that personality was really an ageless thing, and some people could comunicate by instinct. Ever since I first saw Kim in person, I knew it was only a matter of time before I would meet her.

When I saw her at the party, she was just as beautiful as she had been onstage. She was wearing a clean, simple white shirt, and her hair shone like spun gold. I forced myself to look her in the eyes when Karen introduced us, and I grabbed one of her hands before she could pull it away. "I — I wrote to you in September," I said, feeling like a fool. "Did you get my letter?"

"What's your name again?" she asked, smiling. I realized that she was teasing me. I could see from her look that she remembered my letter, and knew who I was as soon as she heard my name. I felt as though I could float.

"Kim —" I said hopefully. I wanted to tell her that she didn't have to be lonely anymore. Instead, I said, "Could I write an article about you for the school paper?"

"Sure," she said, acting casual. "Ask Karen anything you want to know." She was teasing me because she knew I wanted to interview her.

"But couldn't we —" I started.

"Heather!" she laughed in her marvelous throaty voice. She moved away from me to talk to a woman on the other side of the room. At first I felt so hurt and mortified I just wanted to die. Then I realized that a performer like Kim has to circulate among her fans. Besides that, she must have felt some of what I was feeling, and it must have made her uncomfortable.

I knew then how vulnerable Kim was. After all, she was a talented woman who lived on the edge of her feelings, and she was not used to meeting people who could understand her. I knew I had a certain amount of psychic power. Kim had withdrawn from me to protect herself, but I knew she needed me. This was no time for me to dwell on my hurt feelings.

I tried to catch her eyes several times that evening, but she seemed determined to avoid me. That was a good sign, in a way. If she were really indifferent to me, she wouldn't have put on such an act of pretending I wasn't there. Poor Kim. I knew sometimes people cheat themselves out of what they really needed the most. One of us had to be brave, I thought. I made a silent promise to Kim not to let her slip away from me.

I felt like crying after Karen told me that Kim had gone on to the next leg of her tour. I hadn't been able to talk to her for long, but I still had her address. I knew I had to be strong and persistent if I wanted to get her attention.

About that time, I had an incredible dream that seemed so real I knew it must mean something. I dreamed that Kim walked into my bedroom as though she belonged there and put her arms around me. I felt as if I could just melt into her slim, womanly body. She kissed me passionately, and then I knew how much she needed me. When she began touching me, I thought I could just die of happiness. I knew I didn't want to hold back anything from her. I think I came in my sleep.

When I woke up, I knew I had to find some way to break through the barrier Kim put up between herself and other people. I felt her calling me and I knew I had to answer her, no matter how many ordeals I had to undergo.

By spring I stopped going to most of my classes, but I didn't want to tell my Dad right away that I was dropping out. He and my stepmum wouldn't understand my reasons. Karen and Diane seemed to be drifting away from me, but Bennett and I spent a lot of time together. Some of her street friends didn't impress me very much, but I couldn't stand to be alone.

I had to find a way to get to Vancouver, where Kim lived. If I waited for her to come back on tour or send me a letter, I could wait forever. The only question in my mind was how to raise enough money.

I told my Dad I needed money for books, but that only got me $100. Even then, he asked why my teachers were adding more textbooks to the list so late in the year.

I did some babysitting and yard work for people I knew, but that didn't pay very well. Finally Bennett's friend Tara introduced me to a guy she knew who sort of helped me out.

"Hey, you're a cutie," he said when we met. I don't think it's wrong to do something for a lonely man who needs a woman's company now and then. It was not exactly prostitution because I'm not that interested in men, and I was drinking at the time. It wasn't as bad as it sounds.

I told my Dad and stepmum that Bennett had invited me to stay at her parents' cottage. "Just for a week," I told them.

"My parents asked me to invite her," said Bennett. I was glad my Dad didn't ask for a phone number where we could be reached. I think he had other things on his mind. Bennett and Tara drove me to the airport and saw me off on the plane.

When I arrived in Vancouver, I was so excited I could hardly breathe. The air smelled moist, as I expected, but the sun was bright. There were so many leaves and flowers everywhere that I fell in love with the city, even though its main attraction was the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. If you see what I mean.

I had some trouble finding the youth hostel Karen had told me about, but I finally got there before nightfall. Once I was settled in, my situation scared me a little. I thought: What am I going to do here, especially if Kim shuts me out of her life completely? What kind of job can I get with no experience and hardly any high school? What will my Dad and my stepmum say when they find out? How can I survive in a world run by men if I'm really a lesbian and can't change? But I knew that some things are more important than work or school or even social respectability. If I couldn't love someone, I would have no purpose in life. Any honest person has to admit that a close relationship with one other person is the one thing we all want more than money, beauty, power or pleasure. I decided I had come too far to go back to an ordinary life.

The next day I picked up a community newsletter that had an entertainment section. I looked for Kim's name, and I was not disappointed; she was playing at Café Beguine in the West End that night. I knew that was my chance, and I had to make the most of it.

I wore my peach satin pants and shirt outfit, and it showed off the tan I had started before coming to Vancouver. I wondered hopelessly what Kim looked for in a woman, knowing that Karen would never tell me and that Kim herself would probably answer that question sarcastically in self-defense. I felt terribly vulnerable.

When Kim started singing, I fell in love with her voice all over again. She was wearing leather pants, and I couldn't take my eyes off them. She sang all my favourite songs, and some I hadn't heard before: "Eyes Like the Sea," "A Magnet and a Nail," "You'll Live to Regret It," and of course "Wanting You."

After the set was finished, Kim headed for the women's washroom. I was right behind her, my heart pounding so hard that I could see my nipples bouncing, dancing to the song still playing in my head.

When she came out of the cubicle, I forced myself to speak. "Remember me, Kim?" I squeaked. She looked blank, and my heart lurched. "Karen Vasily introduced us in Edmonton," I said. "I came to Vancouver to see you."

She smiled like an angel. "You came all that way just to see me?" she laughed. She clearly thought I was joking. "Well, I hope you like my show." I could see that she was softening toward me, but she still had that defensive look in her eyes.

I seized my courage in both hands. "Kim," I blurted, "couldn't we get together some time? I've admired you for so long. I know you must have a busy schedule, but we could just meet somewhere for a fast drink. I've wanted to talk to you for so long." My face was burning and I felt foolish.

Kim was almost openly laughing at me. When I looked into her shining eyes, I felt as if she could hypnotize me. I knew she was still high from performing for an audience, and that my desperate love was raising her higher. For a second, I hated her for the power she had over me and for the way she enjoyed it.

"You're cute in that outfit," she said gently. She must have noticed that I wasn't wearing a bra. Then, just like in my dream, she put her arms around me and kissed me on the lips.

When she pulled away from me, I was breathing so hard I felt as if I could suffocate or have a heart attack. "Are you coming to see me tomorrow night?" she murmured into my face. I hadn't really planned to, but I nodded, not trusting my own voice. She turned and left the washroom without saying anything else.

For the rest of the evening, the sound of my own blood rushing in my ears was an accompaniment to Kim's music. The men in her band looked almost bored, but I didn't care. Kim looked radiant, and I know I did too. I finally knew I hadn't been chasing her in vain.

The next night, I sat at a table as close to the stage as possible. For the first time, I noticed that most of the other people there were women. Some of them looked as dangerous and cool as the punk men I had seen on the streets. I was afraid of offending those women somehow, because I didn't trust them to resist beating me up in the lane outside. I felt better when I noticed that other women around me looked fairly harmless. Some even seemed to be there with their boyfriends, and those women looked well-dressed and well-cared for.

As I listened to Kim's heavenly, devilish voice, I could see how she could attract all kinds of women, and even men. I knew my Dad wouldn't want me to be in a place like Café Beguine, if he knew.

My Dad would have liked me to study hard, get a college degree, and then marry some respectable man so I wouldn't have to work. That thought made me mad. I thought of all the people like my parents who defended marriage and child-raising, even though their marriages hadn't worked and their children disappointed them. They also defended education, and then hoped their daughters would never have to hit the job market with their useless degrees and dress-for-success suits. Sitting there listening to Kim, I knew that conventional people had no right to tell me how to live. They couldn't teach what they're still trying to learn.

After the performance, I wanted to get close to Kim, but some other woman was grabbing her by the elbow, acting possessive. She muttered something to Kim, who laughed and said, "Just wait, baby." I felt awful when I heard that. Then I remembered Mona Allsuch. The woman talking to Kim was fat and had thick black hair and dark eyes. I wondered what Kim saw in her, but then I remembered sitting in the bar with Bennett and Tara and their friends. I realized that we all have to make do with what's available.

"Kim," I said, to get her attention. She and the dark woman seemed to be leaving, so I had to speak up while I could. "Give me your phone number," I said, noticing how the dark woman stared at me. "I need it," I insisted.

"It's unlisted, honey," Kim said quietly. Of course I should have known she couldn't give it to me in front of Mona, if that was her.

The dark woman said, "Hey, Kim doesn't need another groupie. You'll have to get in line, sunshine." She had a horrible laugh, like someone who grew up in the slums. She also had some crooked teeth. I was stuck in a nightmare.

My eyes pleaded with Kim. "Or your address," I begged, not caring what anyone thought of me. I didn't mean the box number of Fair Weather Recordings. I knew Kim didn't want to leave me in the lurch, but she obviously didn't want to hurt Mona's feelings. When I realized Kim wasn't going to answer me, I felt totally deserted. At the same time, I respected her lesbian sense of honour. I was getting a glimpse of what it must be like to be loved by Kim Rainbow.

I couldn't sleep that night. I probably seemed stuck-up or distracted to the other people in the youth hostel, but I couldn't pay attention to them. Some of them seemed too young to be travelling on their own.

It humiliated me to think of asking Karen for Kim's address and phone number, but I didn't see what choice I had. Luckily, the next day was Sunday, so rates were cheaper. Diane answered the phone, and I didn't ask for Karen. "Sorry to bother you," I almost whispered, "but I need Kim Rainbow's phone number in Vancouver." Diane didn't seem to know where I was.

"She changes it a lot," said Diane. I could hear paper being shuffled. "No, we haven't got her new one. Do you want her address?"

"Yes." For that, I could have kissed Diane's feet.

The beer I had sneaked into the hostel gave me the nerve to start writing Kim a note. I knew I couldn't give up on her. While I was writing, I heard someone open the front door of the hostel for some men. I looked out and was shocked to see a police car at the curb.

I immediately wondered whether my call to Diane could have been traced, and whether my Dad had found out that Bennett left her foster-parents years ago and they never had a cottage, so I couldn't be there. I was petrified and ran into the washroom, turning on the water, hoping no one would barge in. While in there, I heard several sets of heavy footsteps coming upstairs and walking around. There were knocks on a few doors, but I couldn't tell whether the cops were looking for me.

I stayed in the washroom for quite a while after the footsteps went away. I felt sick and drunk, but knew I had to leave the hostel. It would be too easy for anyone to find me there, and I knew both sets of my parents would be furious.

I checked out of the hostel and hit the street with my knapsack. I felt like crying, but I didn't want anyone who saw me to think I was a mixed-up teenage runaway.

My money was almost gone, and that was the main thing that made me feel sick. I was afraid Kim couldn't respect a woman with no job and no money. I didn't know anyone else in Vancouver. I knew what I had to do, and it bothered me.

I spent the night in a cheap hotel room, on a bed with creaking springs. Some of the other people in the halls scared me, but I felt lucky I could still afford a place to

sleep. The next day, I phoned the number of an escort service that was listed in the paper.

The fourth escort service I phoned said yes, they needed more escorts. A man agreed to see me at 5:00 p.m., and gave me an address. I'm not bragging when I say I'm fairly attractive, and I really hoped I could work as a paid companion instead of a streetwalker.

I had a bad feeling about the old brick building where my interview was supposed to be. The man who opened the door was fat and had yellowish skin, with stubble on his face. He took the cigarette out of his mouth to say, "I'm Zig. Who are you?" He looked me up and down.

I felt like leaving, but I needed a job and they say beggars can't be choosers. "I'm Samantha Winter," I said, thinking it was better not to give my real name.

He was drinking straight rye, but didn't offer me any. "Sit down," he said. "You ever worked as a stripper or escort before?" I said no because I thought it wouldn't be safe to give the impression of being really experienced. "My girls all use safes," he told me, and I realized he meant that was a condition of the job. I hadn't thought to bring any form of birth control with me.

As soon as Zig had finished the drink in his glass, he said, "Let's see what you got." He pulled me out of my chair and started pushing me toward the bed. I was getting scared but told myself it wouldn't be so bad if he just wanted to see what I looked like under my clothes.

I tried to keep standing up, but he was pushing me onto the bed. "Lie down, you silly cunt."

I said, "No, not here. I'm not using any birth control." I tried to push him away, but he lay on top of me and pulled at my clothes. "Please," I cried. "We can do this later!" I was too embarrassed to scream in case anyone heard me. He tried to push my legs apart, but I squeezed them together as hard as I could.

He swore and started hitting me. I couldn't help crying. I was terrified he would beat me up and leave me unconscious. When he raped me, I just wanted to get it over with.

As soon as he finished, he stood up, zipped his pants and said, "I'll let you know if you're hired." I pulled my clothes back on and ran. I felt like garbage and knew that I smelled like it too. When I got to the street, people stared at me. I felt I didn't deserve to live.

I cried in a public washroom for a while. I knew I couldn't complain to the police or anyone else, because no one would believe me, or if they did, they would think I had asked for it. I wondered whether anyone in my life would even speak to me if they knew. I was afraid I could be committed to a mental hospital or sent to jail for prostitution. I washed myself as well as I could, but knew I was still filthy. I wanted to throw up so I could be clean inside.

I didn't have much money left, but I really needed a drink so I went into a bar. I met a guy named Elliott who seemed to be in his 20s and wore a denim jacket, so I knew he wasn't another old pig. He was really friendly, and bought me several drinks

while we talked. We went to a hotel and he gave me enough money for another night. I knew I'd have to give him what he wanted, but by then I could numb myself out. Elliott seemed really disgusted with Zig when I told him what happened earlier, but when it comes down to it, all men want the same thing.

The next day I tried to make myself look respectable, and went to several restaurants to see if they needed a waitress. None of them did, and some of the people I talked with were unnecessarily rude. By the time dusk fell, I felt so worthless that I thought it would be no loss if I threw myself under a truck.

The thought of Kim made me feel totally ashamed, but then I remembered her incredible kiss. After all, she's a woman herself, and I thought she might understand what women sometimes have to do to survive. When I remembered how it felt to be held in Kim's arms, and compared that to being screwed by two men, I couldn't help crying on the street.

I had almost lost hope of ever being able to help Kim, but I wanted to see her so badly I couldn't stand it. I found her address on my map, and took three different buses to get there.

Kim's place is a big, old, comfortable-looking house that has been renovated. It looked like the perfect home for her, and I knew I would see it in my dreams for the rest of my life. When I rang the bell, a middle-aged woman came to the door and told me Kim wasn't home. My heart sank, since I knew I wouldn't be allowed to wait inside. I started walking away, but after the door had closed, I came back and sat down on the concrete steps.

It was drizzling, but I didn't mind. I walked around the block a few times during the four hours it took Kim to get home. I was soaked to the skin and shivering when I finally saw her at the wheel of her car, pulling into the driveway. I didn't see Mona with her, which made me feel better.

I ran to her with my teeth chattering. I couldn't stop shaking. I felt as if I would just die if I couldn't hold her after all I had gone through. "Kim!" I yelled. "Kim, I've been waiting for you!" I threw my arms around her, and held on tight so she couldn't push me away. I was crying so hard I couldn't see.

Like the strong, wise woman she is, Kim pulled me into her house, calming me down with her hands and her voice. "Ssh!" she whispered into my ear. "You'll be all right." I really wanted to believe Kim could take hold of my life and make it all right. I knew I could never learn to do anything as well as Kim could make music, but I had earned her attention with my patience and my pain. For a few minutes, I felt safer than I had ever felt before.

When I had calmed down enough, I found myself sitting on a chesterfield with a blanket around me and a cup of hot tea in my hands. The grey-haired woman who had opened the door was making sounds in the kitchen. Several instrument cases stood about the floor, and Kim herself was giving me a concerned look that made her look older than I had ever seen her, though still beautiful. Kim will always look perfect to me, even when she has a face full of lines and headful of silver hair.

I was depressed to see the dark-haired woman at the other end of the room. She was talking on the phone; with a jolt, I realized she was talking about me. I suddenly just wanted to fall asleep in Kim's lap and never wake up.

"The police are coming here," Kim told me, her voice gentle. "They'll take you home." I had a painful urge to laugh.

"It's really for your own good," said the other woman.

Tears started gushing from my eyes again, and I felt mortified. It occurred to me that these two women were over thirty, and not totally different from other people their age. So of course they would think of handing me over to the cops, just as my father would think of sending me back to school. Kim and her girlfriend were treating me like a mentally disturbed groupie, and I couldn't have expected anything else. I felt I was drowning in an ocean of sorrow, while the rest of humanity swam past over my head.

At least I had seen the inside of my idol's house, and had a kiss from her to remember. That would have to be enough for now.

The two cops who came for me were fairly polite, so I treated them the same way. I didn't try to stop my tears, but otherwise I controlled myself. When they contacted my Dad, he sounded as upset as I had expected, but was too worried to be furious just then.

Dad arranged for me to take the first plane home to Edmonton the next day. He and my stepmum met me, and we drove home in amazing silence. I knew from the time I saw them that I wouldn't have much freedom for a long time to come. I knew that was the price I would have to pay for breaking loose just once in my life.

I've been home for about six weeks now. I'm in the alcohol detox program, and I have to see a counsellor once a week. She's a fairly nice woman, but needless to say, she's not gay and she'll never see forty again. My Dad and stepmum say they'll respect my decision not to go back to school, but obviously they're hoping I'll change my mind. They also say they'll respect my decision to live as a lesbian if I'm sure that's how I feel, but I know they don't believe it's a permanent condition. My real mother blames my Dad for what she calls "the situation" and "her problems."

I've wanted to write a long letter to Kim, telling her how I feel, but I'm afraid anything I send through the mail could be used to prove that I need to be locked up somewhere. So I'm writing this instead, and I'll keep it hidden so nobody finds it. Someday, I want to tell Kim the whole story of this time in my life.

By now I'm sure I'm pregnant, though no one else has found out yet. I hope to keep it hidden long enough that I can't be pressured into an abortion because I really want this baby, whether or not anyone else could understand my reasons.

I'm going to name the baby Kim Rainbow Wiley, whether it's a girl or a boy. I really feel as if this baby came to me from Kim, the one person I know who could love me the way I love her. I still have a deep feeling that we'll be together someday, even though it doesn't look that way for now. My son or daughter will be a link between us. I know this new person was meant to be born. I want my Kim to be proud of the baby I conceived in suffering, when I was trying to reach her, and I wish she could be with me when I give birth.

I haven't seen any of my friends since I've been in the program. I think Bennett and Tara are afraid of my parents, and Karen and Diane think they're too intellectual for me. I get to play my tapes here, and that helps. I can hardly help crying when I hear "Wanting You", or "A Magnet and a Nail," but the tears give me some relief.

Oh Kim, I'll never stop wanting you, and that's a promise written in blood. As you sing it so well, there's nothing as strong as the love of a woman.

Lizards

I've lived in the desert all my life, and I wouldn't live anywhere else. Every day I watch the sun go down behind the hills west of my land, and every evening in summer, Etta and I watch the moon come up. We'll be doing that as long as we can both see.

I've spent so much time in the sun that I'm as dark as Etta now, even though I was quite a paleface as a young girl. I explain the change in my colour as a trick of sunlight, even though I know it has just as much to do with the way Etta and I talk without words. We've been giving each other our thoughts for so long now it only seems natural that we've come to look more alike too.

I grew up on my parents' farm here in southern Idaho, but Etta was a big-city girl from the East who came out with her husband as a young woman. I still remember the dresses she used to wear on occasions like going to church — what a lady she was. Still is. When she first met me, she thought I was a boy. When she found out otherwise, she thought I was going straight to hell along with my parents who let me run around in short hair and overalls, so Etta took it upon herself to bring a little Christian decorum into my life. Ha! We've both been teaching each other things ever since.

I love walking in the hills with Etta because she can hear the animals almost as well as I can. Jackrabbits give the impression of being nervous, like all other rabbits, but they're the brassiest things on four feet. Snakes and lizards are harder to hear because they're cold-blooded and that means their insides change according to the weather a lot more than ours. If you can tune in to a lizard, you can always tell whether it's going to snow, rain, or stay hot. I think of Etta and me as a pair of old lizards, being a lot wiser than we look. When it's hot, we stay in the shade and don't move any more than we have to, and when it's cold we hibernate in our warm house. In between, we run around using the energy we get from the sun and each other. Like lizards, we're harmless to people but we're too wild to thrive in captivity. We can camouflage ourselves as part of the rocks, too.

Etta's daughter Bert uses a lot of long words to describe how animals live. She's a vet, so she gets along well with our pets when she comes to visit. We've got a Shetland mare named Trigger, three dogs and about six cats at a time, though it's hard to keep track because they're always having kittens.

Bert and her girlfriend Janet drove out to visit us last month, and they brought their good-looking friend Terry this time. Our weather was just beautiful and our vegetables were ripening, so Etta and I put the girls to work picking them so Etta could do her canning. We love having young women visitors, but nobody gets to stay idle at our place.

After supper, we would all sit out on the deck and watch the moon rise. The first night, Etta was on one side of me and Terry was on the other, so I got a good look at Terry's profile while I was pretending to watch the sky. Terry doesn't look any older than 30, and her nose is so straight it looks as if it was drawn with a ruler. She has a nice figure, not too thin or too plump, and she has freckles. I think that always makes a young person look good-natured, but brown spots on someone my age just look like age marks.

We put Bert and Janet in Bert's old room, as usual, and Terry got the guest room. I wondered if she might get lonely in there, but then I thought to myself: Shame on you, Agnes, you're thinking like an old goat. I prayed for serenity and a calm mind, and I felt more peaceful afterwards.

"Pornography," Janet was saying the next morning. The way she said it made it sound like hellfire and damnation. "Every time I go to the corner store, there's a rack full of these magazines like *True Crime* and *Hot Ass*." That got a snicker from all of us, but Janet kept going. "Lately, I even saw one called *Lesbian Nymphos*. Can you believe it?"

"Maybe it was for us," I suggested. I almost wished I could see it.

"Bullsh — hogwash," said Janet. "These magazines are all for men. Men produce them and men buy them. I bet the women who posed for those 'lesbian' scenes had never kissed another woman in their lives." I immediately felt sorry for the women, if Janet was right. She went on, "You don't know how gross some of that stuff is. They've got women in chains, being beaten and raped. Don't you ever see stuff like that out here?"

Etta and I looked at each other. "We don't look for it, honey," said Etta.

"We don't go into town that often," I said. "When we do, we don't have time to read magazines." I knew Janet wouldn't leave the topic until we had seen her point.

"In the city," she said, "we can't avoid seeing them. They're in every drugstore. And the men swarm around them like flies around a dead cat." One of our mother cats, Katrina, strolled through the kitchen, looking disdainful.

"That's bad," Etta said sympathetically. After all, Janet is her daughter-in-law. I knew Bert agreed with Janet on issues like that, but I couldn't tell how Terry felt. She looked beautiful but serious, and I really wondered what was going through her mind.

Myself, I felt confused. I could hardly believe that Janet couldn't go to a drugstore without seeing pictures of women in chains, but if that was true, I was against it. On the other hand, I still wished I could see some of these new kind of dirty books so I would know what I'm not supposed to like. When Etta and I were young, we had to use our imaginations.

"We started a boycott," Janet was saying. "I think it's doing some good. Some local store owners agreed to keep their worst magazines behind the counter, though I wish they'd just throw them out." Bert and Terry were both nodding, as if to say that they agreed with every word.

I started clearing the table by way of changing the subject. Bert, Janet and Terry all jumped up to help me, and before long, I had to sit down because my help wasn't needed. Watching the girls, I admired the way Bert's black hair contrasted with Janet's short brown curls and Terry's long chestnut braid hanging down her back. I wished I could unbraid it and comb it out for her. My hair was almost that colour once.

Etta reached across the table and held my hand, letting me know she still loves me. She's older than me, though she doesn't look it. Her eyes are as dark and deep as ever.

When Etta went out to feed Trigger and the dogs, Bert volunteered to ask the neighbours up the road if she could borrow two horses from them, so the three girls could go for a ride over the hills. Janet was all in favour, but Terry looked nervous. I suspected she had never been on a horse before; some city girls have never had the opportunity. I patted her hand and told her she could ride Trigger, because she's the gentlest little old horse in the world.

When Bert and Janet came back on two full-sized horses, I knew Terry would look funny riding along on Trigger, but I still thought it was the best arrangement. I considered offering to ride double with her but I knew the girls wanted some time to themselves.

As I watched the three of them trotting off, I remembered the way I used to ride our horse Prince at full gallop over these hills when I was a teenager. I almost broke his legs and my neck many a time, but I must have had a guardian angel because we always came home safe and sound.

The girls were back in time for dinner at one o'clock, but I should have known they wouldn't like what we were having. Before Bert could stop her, Janet said, "We can't eat sausages. We're vegetarians."

Bert interrupted. "But it doesn't matter," she said. "We can eat meat while we're here." I decided to ignore Janet.

"This must be something new, honey," I said to Bert. "You grew up on meat. Does it bother you to eat your patients?" Bert gave me her look that's part embarrassed and part stubborn.

"Well, yeah," she said. "Aggie, haven't you ever thought about what animals go through before they're turned into packaged meat?"

"I never think about it," I said firmly. "No one would ever eat meat if they had to eat in a slaughterhouse."

"Ha!" said Janet, looking like one of Katrina's kittens when it has just pounced on a fly. "That's what we mean. You can't even stand to think about it."

Terry suddenly spoke up. "The torture and slaughter of animals is part of the whole system that oppresses us, Aggie. As long as we assume that animals were put here to serve our needs, we can't be surprised if men feel the same way about women, or if racism is still going strong. When the first white settlers came to this country,

they killed off a lot of the Indians and the wildlife, then they domesticated Africans, oxen and horses. For centuries, women were a servant class with no rights, and children are still considered the property of their parents. This society is built on oppression.'' Etta had come out of the kitchen during this speech, and we all stood around listening.

Terry looked and sounded as righteous as a preacher. I admired her style, even though I felt there must be a hole in her argument somewhere. ''Keeping a horse is hardly the same thing as slavery, dear,'' said Etta in her ladylike way. Ha to you too, Janet, I thought.

It was Terry who responded to that. ''An unequal relationship doesn't have to be cruel,'' she smiled at Etta. ''I'm sure your animals love you and you love them too, but they're not free. They probably couldn't survive on their own. I'm sure not all slave owners worked their slaves to death either, but the owners had all the power to decide how the slaves were going to be treated.'' Janet nodded, putting a big salad on the table.

''Let's eat,'' I said, setting out the baked potatoes. I hoped my cooking would cheer Terry up. ''Idaho spuds,'' I said. ''Best in the world.'' For awhile, the only sounds came from the chink of plates and cutlery, and from chewing mouths. ''Vegetables are alive too,'' I said to nobody in particular. ''Should we eat them?''

''We have to draw the line somewhere,'' laughed Bert. ''I'll eat vegetables any day, especially fresh from the garden.'' She was trying to make peace, just like her mother. Terry still looked tragic.

''The worst thing about porn,'' said Janet as though she had never been interrupted, ''is the way women are shown loving it. Men really want to believe that. The victims always have smiles on their vacant faces. How do you educate men when they're getting that kind of message from every newsstand?''

''Why do you have to educate men, Janet?'' asked Etta.

''Because if they don't learn that we're people, they might kill us off, Ma!'' said Bert. ''And themselves too.'' I wondered what experiences she could have had in the city to make her say something like that. Etta had the same thought.

''Roberta,'' she said anxiously.

''Oh, Ma,'' said Bert. ''Obviously I'm still alive and well, so don't worry. But Janet's right. So is Terry. There's too much exploitation, too much crime, too much pollution, too many sick animals. That's why we have to come out here sometimes, back to the land.''

I acted indignant. ''I thought you kids came out here to see us!''

Bert and Janet laughed. ''We do, Aggie,'' said Bert. ''We love you two.''

''But we need fresh air, too,'' said Janet. I suspected that 'back to the land' was a trendy saying among city girls, but I was touched anyway. There's something about the hills around here that always reminds me of young women, and vice versa.

I noticed that Terry was totally ignoring the conversation. ''Terry,'' I said, ''you've never seen the old shack in the hills. Let me show you after supper.'' Bert and Janet groaned, but I could see that Terry was interested. According to rumour, the old shack was built about 100 years ago by a prospector. He must not have found what he was looking for, especially if it had been gold.

The sun was setting when we got up there. We watched it from a vantage point beside the shack halfway up a hill. When I showed Terry the inside of the shack, with the broken dishes and other rubbish, she seemed spooked. "Aggie," she said, "it must have been hard to come out when you and Etta were young." She said it as though she saw some connection between the ruined shack and my hard life.

"Women didn't really come out then, Terry," I told her. "But it was more respectable for spinsters to live together than it is now. Women weren't supposed to live alone." I sighed, leaning against the shack. "Etta and I were lucky. Her husband died and left her some property, then I took over my parents' farm after my father died. We did all right." I smiled, thinking of the early days when Bert was a child and we all got up with the chickens.

Terry was watching the sky, as if looking for a sign from God. I stood close to her and lowered my voice. "Things turn out the way they're meant to, child," I said near her ear.

"Then I wonder who the hell is running the show," she said. Her words were bitter. I knew there was a story behind them.

"When you're hurting," I replied, "you think your pain fills the world, but it doesn't. You can tell me about it." I looked away to help her feel less self-conscious.

"It's nothing much," she muttered. "A woman I was involved with dropped me for another woman. I never thought she would do that. Bert and Janet invited me out here to help me get over it." Terry folded her arms under her breasts as if she knew I wanted to hold her.

"Listen to an older woman," I said quietly. "You'll find someone who won't let you go. Or someone will find you when you're not looking." I squeezed her shoulders and kissed her on the forehead.

Terry's blue eyes opened wide as she stared at me, backing away. "We'd better go back," she said. "It's getting dark." Agnes, I thought, you've hit a painful spot and scared her off. I kept up a stream of small talk on our way down, but it didn't seem to help.

Over the next few days, Janet and Etta had a running argument about God. "A male God is just a reflection of the male power structure," Janet announced while shelling peas. "I refuse to pray to a father-figure or accept a Christian definition of sin."

Etta straightened her back. "There is neither male nor female in Jesus Christ," she said. I hoped Janet would have the good sense not to tackle Etta on the Bible.

"The Goddess is a better representation of the creative power in each of us," Janet went on. I looked at her until she turned.

"Do you really go to church and pray to a Goddess?" I asked. I wanted to know.

"Not me," said Terry.

"Not a church," said Bert.

"We have ceremonies," said Janet. "We belong to a coven that usually meets outdoors."

"A coven of witches?" asked Etta, looking shocked.

"Well, yes. We practice the Old Religion that was persecuted by the Christian Inquisition," said Janet, on her dignity. "We don't worship the devil or cast spells," she added.

Etta was at a loss for a minute, then she began to laugh until she was bent over double. "Ma," protested Bert, defending her partner, "it's not a joke, you know. Our faith is as serious as yours. We all worship in our own ways."

"Well, I'm sure God is watching out for you, honey," said Etta, wiping her eyes. "I'm sure all prayers rise to the same place if they're well-intended." Janet opened her mouth.

"We don't pray to a man," I said firmly, to cut her off. "We pray to God. There's a difference."

"Amen," said Etta. I squeezed her knee, then went out to work on the new pine dresser I was making, so I wouldn't have to hear the rest of the argument.

Over the next few days I went out of my way to put Terry at ease. I got her to help me feed the animals and took her with me to the hardware store. Finally, I offered to rub her suntan oil on her when she was sunbathing in her shorts, and she let me do it. No one else was around.

"Terry, I'm a harmless old woman," I murmured in her ear, stroking the oil into her smooth, tight skin. "You never have to be afraid of me." She laughed softly.

"But you made me nervous." She looked around to see if anyone else could hear. "Now I don't know what to expect from you." I noticed that this remark could be taken as a plea for sympathy, or as a flirty hint. Her face was red, and it wasn't entirely from sunburn.

"Did you think old women were that different from young women?" I asked her. "Or did you think folks with long-time partners can't care for anyone else?"

Terry squirmed, and I pulled my hands away. "You're old enough to be my mother," she said, so quietly I could barely hear her. I knew it took courage for her to say that.

"So what?" I asked. She didn't answer. After a pause, I said, "Be careful not to get too much sun, Terry. You burn faster in the mountains." I left her with a book, and went back to my dresser.

It rained the day before the girls left. The smell of sagebrush and Mormon tea and the other wild plants I love hung fresh in the air when we all sat out to watch the sunset. Suddenly, Terry stood up and went inside. I knew she wanted me to follow, so I did. "Come upstairs," she said quietly over her shoulder.

She led me up the stairs, then turned, "I just wanted to say goodbye, Aggie," she murmured, raising her arms for a hug. I held her a long time, breathing in the young smell of her hair and her skin. Her firm breasts pressed against my old saggy ones, but she didn't seem to mind. I kissed her gently, then let her go.

"Things will get better if you don't give up, baby," I said into her ear. "I know. God helps those who help themselves."

"Thanks, Aggie," she replied, almost in a whisper. I could feel her energy, and it was higher than it had been before. If Janet's Goddess has the spirit of a young

woman, I thought, and the experience of an old one, I could be grateful for Her presence.

The next morning Etta and I helped the girls load their things in the car. I knew Etta's eyes weren't dry as we waved goodbye. Neither were mine.

"You old fox," she began laughing, turning to me when the car was out of sight. "You shameless heathen."

"I don't slip anything past you, do I?" I laughed in return.

"No you don't, and a good thing too," she said. "Well, I hope you helped that girl. She needed some attention and you were glad to give it."

"Next time she comes to visit," I said, looking sideways at my mate, "I might give her some more."

Etta gave me a good slap on the shoulder, and chased me a short way around the yard. "Ooh." She stopped, breathing hard. "I have to catch my breath."

"Not me, Mother," I grinned at her, trying to breathe quietly.

Etta leaned on me. "Bert looks healthy, in spite of her carrying-on."

"They'll probably live as long as we will," I said. "God willing." With our arms around each other, we went into the house to renew old acquaintance and upset our bodies with another cup of coffee.

Secrets of the Invisible World

"Mavis Simpson, do you admit that you caused Elder White's cow to stop giving milk?" The accused has a dry mouth and dry throat.

"No, your Honour."

"Mistress Simpson, do you admit that you caused Brother Goodman's crop to fail?"

"No." Silence. "Your Honour." Or is it Your Worship, Your Reverence?

"Do you admit that you caused Mistress Cruikshank to die in childbirth?"

"No! I couldn't — why would I even if I could?"

"Woman, I charge you on your immortal soul to answer truthfully in the presence of these witnesses. Now, do you admit that —"

"No."

"Is it not true that you committed an act of incest with your own brother? Do you not admit to committing further abominations in the sight of God with members of your own sex? With animals? With children? With demons?" A murmur is spreading throughout the courtroom, not outraged and hysterical as one would guess, but low and insistent.

"Witch, witch, witch, witch, witch, witch, burn the witch, witch, thou shalt not suffer a witch, witch..." Heat rises, spreads, and threatens to suffocate the accused.

"I never did it." Can anyone hear her? She can hardly speak.

"Goody Simpson, do you admit that you caused your own throat to tighten in response to the charges against you? Is this the act of an innocent person? Are you prepared to stand before the eternal Judge, woman? Would you plead innocence there, knowing as you do what your soul and body are capable of?"

"Please!"

"Mavis Simpson, I sentence you —"

"No! Spare me! Your Reverence, brothers and sisters, I beg you in the name of Christ the Redeemer —"

"How dare you blaspheme in this court, harlot? The Lord cannot save such as you."

The murmur grows louder: "Witch, witch, witch, witch." The heat is intolerable, but it will grow much worse before the accused can be free.

I throw off the blankets, and suck in the fresh air from the window. The curtains make a soft swishing noise across the windowsill as the fickle breeze pushes them forward and then lets them rest. I feel refreshed for a split second until I remember that I have to face my husband in court.

I find it hard to shake off the mood of my dream and concentrate on fixing breakfast. I focus on Gloria's rusty black skillet, and on the white and yellow of an egg frying in butter. The coffee pot holds a distorted image of my morning face and uncombed brown hair. My body beneath the bathrobe feels free to move and to breathe because no one is watching me. I feel almost invisible.

Gloria has gone to work her shift at the gay and feminist bookstore, leaving me alone in her house. It's a big colonial house, about two hundred years old. Almost everything in this house has been rebuilt or needs fixing. I like the faded wallpaper, the bay windows and the high ceilings, full of echoes. The house blends into a New England landscape of trees, hills and rocky coastline.

If I had lived here in the 1600s, I probably would have been charged with witchcraft. Being committed to a mental hospital is the modern equivalent and my husband Peter tried to do that to me. Thou shalt not suffer a maniac to run around loose.

I comb my hair and wonder what to wear when I face Peter in court. For months he has threatened to sue me for divorce on grounds of adultery, and now he has finally done it. He always thought I would give in and stay married to avoid a humiliating inquisition. I always thought he would back down for lack of evidence, since I never committed adultery before I left him.

Peter's concept of unfaithfulness in wives seems as deep and broad as the traditional Christian concept of sin. It can include a woman's illegitimate thoughts, unfathered by a man, and the heresy of friendship between women. My lawyer has told me the legal definition of adultery, but I'm not convinced that she can defend my innocence in court.

Before I left Peter, he argued with me about Gloria. "Mavis, did you know you left your own party for twenty minutes?"

"No, I didn't think it was that long."

"Why did you have to spend that much time alone in a bedroom with another woman? How do you think that looks, dammit?"

"We weren't in a bedroom!" My voice was high, unconvincing.

"Then where were you?"

"In the room with all the coats."

"Where were the coats?"

"Piled on the bed."

"So you were in the bedroom. You lied. How do you think I feel when my own wife acts like a lesbian in front of my colleagues? Don't you know how people talk about you?"

"Peter, we're just friends, for Christ's sake! Can't I talk to a friend without being accused of —"

"You're lying!" he sneered into my face. He was in a cold, angry, sarcastic mood, and he wanted to hit me. Instead he picked up a lamp and smashed it on the floor. I was terrified of his manly rage, which seemed to be backed up by the police, by the courts, by his own psychiatric profession, by society at large, and even by God Himself. My fear made Peter angrier, since he wanted me to trust him. He knew I felt more comfortable with Gloria than with him, and that rankling knowledge made him see me as a liar, a cheat, a man-hater and a lesbian.

"For God's sake!" I begged him. "Why did you marry me?"

"Because I loved you! I should have known better. I knew you had those tendencies. You even told me so."

"What tendencies?"

"I thought you'd change. I thought I could help you. I should have known when you told me about that girl who was your friend in grade school. And when I found out about all the guys you screwed before I met you. You're sick, Mavis." I moved slowly away from him like a hunted animal trying to blend in with its surroundings. Witches of old were said to be shape-changers who ran with the forest creatures when they could no longer bear human company.

Peter quickly swallowed the scotch in his glass, then slammed out the door. In the resounding silence, I picked up pieces of the broken lamp and tried to make the room look as neat and cozy as possible.

After one of these scenes, he would come back with flowers, chocolates or steaks and a bottle of wine. He would kiss me and beg my forgiveness, broil the steaks, light the candles and tell me how beautiful I was. He would explain that he really loved me, that he really wasn't a violent man, that he hated men who mistreated women. He would remind me that he approved when I started volunteering on the Rape Crisis Line. He would point out that he was just trying to be reasonable, and that I needed to be told when my behaviour was indiscreet. Like a priest warning his spiritual daughter against the evils of sorcery, he seemed to feel a responsibility to restrain my irrational, feminine nature. Peter would ask me to look at things from his point of view. He would ask whether any man could be expected to tolerate unfaithfulness from the wife he loves.

Early in our marriage, Peter's apologies made me feel better. He is trying, I would think. I didn't know yet how trying he would become, in the most legal sense. I would hope for the best, and he would touch me like an innocent young man discovering a female body for the first time. My own hunger would give me a childlike faith in his promises. On rare occasions, I would reach orgasm; when I couldn't, I would fake it so he would know how much I liked his attention.

Then he would roll angrily away from me. Sometimes, he would jump up and stomp out to the kitchen for a drink. If I followed him to ask if anything was wrong, he would tell me what I was most afraid to hear: I was becoming a sexually demanding woman who could never be satisfied. Or I was a manipulating wife who was obviously faking pleasure to make a fool of him. He lived in fear that he had been sucked into an alliance with a spider-woman who liked to collect sexual victims. He was suffering, and that was why he always needed a drink.

I told Peter about an essay I read on witchcraft, written by a 17th-century Puritan minister, John Whipple of Connecticut. Entitled "Secrets of the Invisible World," it described the dreadful things witches can do to other people, to animals, to objects and to crops, even without being physically present. The motiveless cruelty attributed to witches is obviously the sadism of the reverend himself, who probably beat his wife and would have liked to whip half the women in his congregation. I wanted Peter to see the insanity of a system in which people could be convicted of the impossible.

Peter thought I was naive. "How do you know they were all innocent? I'm not saying they were really witches, but why were some women accused of that, and not others? Most of them were probably sociopaths by our standards. If a woman poisoned her husband or her neighbours in those days, chances are no one would find the evidence, since they didn't do autopsies. So they'd call it a curse, or the evil eye. It's interesting how many of those women confessed to witchcraft after they were accused. Obviously they felt guilty of something."

"Suspects were tortured, Peter." I was angry, even though I warned myself not to let him do this to me. "They were pricked all over with pins to find the devil's mark, they were kept without food and sleep, and God knows what else. Anyone would confess to anything if they were treated like that."

He smiled at my childish concern for my sister women who were long dead. "So you think church authorities just wanted to persecute innocent housewives. Well, Mavis, it's not happening any more, so you have nothing to worry about. Women are favoured under the law nowadays. It's the men who are presumed guilty until proven innocent." I knew he wanted to complain about his maintenance payments to his ex-wife, so I let the argument drop. Anyway, he was being generous that night: He didn't think I was obsessive, just misguided and emotional.

I resisted Peter's pressure on me to go see one of his colleagues, Dr. Collins. As long as I wouldn't go, Peter could say I was resisting therapy, but if I went to one of his brother shrinks, the consequences could be much worse. Just making an appointment with George Collins could be taken as my confession, and Peter could fill in the blanks. I was seriously thinking of leaving him anyway, and how could I tell that to another psychiatrist? Silence was my best defence.

After I came to know Gloria at the Women's Centre, I realized that my dilemma was taking on a new dimension. Meeting an attractive, exuberant and experienced woman in this town was like seeing a bouquet of red balloons floating through the morning fog. I had supposed there were colourful people leading interesting lives everywhere in the world, but it was hard for me to believe that while I was married to Peter.

Gloria seemed miraculously free from the pressures that turn most people into frustrated cogs in a system. It took me a while to realize that she was enough of an heiress not to need an earned income, which is why she could afford to be involved in so many causes. She spoke up for what she believed. Like other confident people who believe they can win, she often came out on top. She didn't fit the discreet feminine role women have been pressed into for centuries. That must be why I trusted her from the beginning.

When I started telling her about Peter, her reaction was much stronger than I expected. "How long have you known this man, Mavis?" She looked unnecessarily concerned.

"Almost three years now. We've been married a year."

"What do you know about his past? Was he married before?"

"Yes, he has an ex-wife and two kids. He gives her regular support payments."

Gloria ignored this evidence of responsibility. "Why did they break up?"

"It wasn't completely his fault." I felt I had to show her a fair picture of the situation. "She developed a drinking problem and started having affairs with his colleagues. He blames himself for letting it happen, but he was too busy to give her enough attention. Marriage breakdown is complicated, Gloria. You can never put all the blame on one person."

I didn't like the kind of smile she gave me, as though she could see my fate written on my forehead. "Have you ever talked to the ex-wife?"

"No. I have nothing against her, but Gloria, how much good could that do? What's between Peter and me is between Peter and me. What was between them was between them." Several chilling thoughts slid through my mind like ice cubes: how much of what Peter told me could I believe? For me, his past was an invisible world, full of secrets. Not to mention his mind. But if he never loved me, why did he marry me? What did he have to gain from lying to me? If our whole marriage was an evil game designed by a mad psychiatrist to brainwash his gullible bride, then how could I trust anyone's perceptions, including my own? If Peter was capable of manipulating someone he claimed to love, what about Gloria? She was openly strong-willed and determined to bring about massive changes in other people. She had never promised me peace and protection, as he did. I had to keep her from seeing my confusion.

She saw it anyway. "Mavis," she said, throwing an arm around me before I could back away. "I'll be here if you need me. I'm serious. You can call me any time you need to. It's not weakness to reach out for help when you need it." I was embarrassed by this demonstration of what the Women's Centre women call "sisterhood".

"Thanks, Gloria." What else could I say? "I will. You can call me too, any time." I was trying to be as fair as possible. I knew she thought I was an abused wife because Peter went into rages, and because she couldn't really imagine herself in my place. Or in his. She didn't seem to understand that most men would judge me the guilty party. I believed Gloria cared about me. I clutched this belief to my heart like a prisoner clutching a token from her lover on the outside.

As it turned out, the end of my marriage was as melodramatic as Gloria had anticipated. I had tried to bring her into the social life I shared with Peter, and it only made things worse. He must have felt her magnetic pull, as I did, and it shocked him. He accused us both of neurosis and unnatural affection. He blamed Gloria for driving him to extremes in his campaign to help me adjust to marriage. He seemed to know she was mostly a woman's woman, though I would never have told him. He suspected her of being a High Priestess of man-hatred and unholy ambition.

He suspected that I was being drawn away from him. He accused me of planning to leave him, and I couldn't honestly deny it, so I lied. When he accused me of lying, he was telling the truth. I wanted to negotiate a separation agreement, but I kept

a few things in a plastic bag in case I had to get out fast. I started quietly going to job interviews and looking at apartments. I was preparing myself for independence.

But I wasn't prepared for the way he exploded after finding the plastic bag and coming to the right conclusion. "You stupid, stupid woman!" This echoed off the walls. "You really think you can lie to me!" Of course he didn't believe I was just taking a few things to the cleaners. With one furious pull, he ripped my blue blouse apart, then did the same to my other clothes from the bag. "You think I'm too stupid to see what's going on, don't you? You think I don't know what you're planning to do! You're going nowhere, you bitch. You're not leaving this house!" He waded into my closet, pulled out clothes and tore them to shreds while I stood like a pillar of salt.

Seeing my chance, I ran down the stairs as though the hounds of hell were after me. My goal was the front door. His howl of rage came after me, propelling me forward. I heard things crashing behind me.

I tore the door open and ran through it. I couldn't afford to slow down long enough to grab a coat; soon he would be ripping those up too. I was chilled to the bone, but kept running for several blocks. When I saw a taxi, I waved wildly. It stopped and I jumped in. "No," I explained to the driver, "I'm not alright." I gave him Gloria's address. She had made me an offer, and the time had come to take her up on it.

I stood on her doorstep, a shaking but determined refugee. "Mavis!" she exclaimed with pleased surprise, pulling me inside. Her eyes and thick chestnut hair shone in the dim light. I let her give me a drink and warm me by building a fire in the fireplace.

I felt safe with Gloria. The following night I let her make love to me. In fact, I encouraged her and returned the pleasure. I had secretly wanted to do those things for a long time, and I didn't see how I could be damned any further. I would never be sane by Peter's standards.

I've been with Gloria several weeks now. I know I've plunged into this relationship too soon. We both have. She's taken special pride in introducing me to the sacred rites of woman love. Now she is my godmother, my sister and my lover. I feel like praying to the Goddess that her passion for me doesn't burn itself out.

Gloria claims she wants me and all other women to be free, but she is not really a selfless feminist. No one is. I need my own space and my own life, at least until after the divorce, but she doesn't want to let me go. Or I'm too weak-willed to move out.

Peter is suing me for divorce on grounds of adultery. I want the divorce, but it is important for me to contest the charge. How does the law define sex between women? What could Peter or his lawyer really know about such things, which take place in that vast realm of experience they call unhealthy or immoral or illegal? Gloria and I are living in a world as invisible to most people as the dark side of the moon, but men like Peter still have some power over us.

I put on my new dove-grey suit with matching pumps for my morning job interview. I am cleverly disguised as a normal, competent woman. Inside, I burn and freeze with all the emotions defined by medieval philosophers: wrath, fear, guilt, remorse, desire, hope, despair, even pity. While walking to my interview, I wonder

whether my marriage to Peter ever had a chance. Did he always have premonitions that I would desert him for someone else, someone not even male? I know that rage often comes from fear, and I know the man is hag-ridden by the word "abnormal."

I wonder if my abortions will come up in court. I am a ruthless baby-killer, according to Peter, and even according to me. "All right," I said. "We can call it murder if you like; I still say it's justified. If you take away my pills, rape me and lock me in a room with a coathanger, I'll do what I feel is necessary. I don't hate children, but I won't bring a baby into this marriage when we still have things to work out."

"Mavis, have you ever cared for anyone in your life?"

"Oh yes. Why do you think I'm here, arguing with you?" I will seem cold, hard and unnatural if this conversation is replayed in court.

Of course rebellious women have always been considered child-killers. The ancient Greeks had Medea, who killed her two children to get revenge on her fickle husband. In the eighteenth century, Goya painted Spanish witches as demented old women boiling babies in a cauldron. In the twentieth century, Margaret Sanger was arrested for teaching married women how to avoid conceiving babies against their will. Women who want to control their own fate through their bodies are still accused of being against life. Women like me are feared as angels of death, bringing oblivion to men and their seed.

I suddenly envision myself as a dramatic figure in a long black dress that flaps in a brisk wind off the Atlantic. Everything about me flows and ripples: my long, unbound hair, my layers of skirt and my enveloping black cloak. Witches are usually pictured in motion, sailing through the sky on broomsticks or striding over cobblestoned streets, unstoppable as fate. Their flowing, flickering quality terrifies the uninitiated because it shows that they are as changeable as life, as adaptable as chameleons. They can appear anywhere, and disappear at will.

I arrive at my interview on time, and answer the usual questions. It seems to go well, but I can't tell whether they will hire me or not. Walking out of the building, I feel dizzy. The pavement wants to rise up to meet my face, my stomach churns and my head reverberates. I lean against a wall until I feel well enough to walk again.

I blame my menstrual cycle and the cauldron of medieval passions inside me for weakening my womanly strength. I must be strong, I tell myself. I return to Gloria's house, a woman's stronghold.

The phone rings. "Mrs. Simpson?" I recognize the voice of Peter's lawyer, and I want to tell him that my real name is Mavis Braddock, if he doesn't know. "I'm afraid I have some bad news for you. I mean — it's about your husband."

"Couldn't you speak to my lawyer?"

"It's not about the case, Mrs. Simspon. Your husband was in an accident."

"A car accident? Is he badly hurt?"

The silence lasts a little too long. "Are you sitting down, Mrs. Simpson?"

"He's dead, isn't he?" I am strangely calm, though lightheaded.

"Yes." I hear an intake of breath.

"What do I have to do?" I hear myself say. "Identify the body? Make funeral arrangements?" Of course, you fool, I think to myself. You're what they call the next of kin.

"Yes. I'm sorry." I suddenly wonder why Peter's lawyer was the one to phone me. Then it occurs to me that he is privileged to know where I live and how I can be reached.

"Mrs. Simpson. There's something else you should probably know. Your husband withdrew his suit against you."

"He did?"

"Two days ago. I drafted a letter to your lawyer, giving her the details. Your husband and I agreed that there wasn't enough evidence against you or Dr. Collins."

I almost drop the phone. "He thought I was having an affair with George Collins?" I sense the embarrassment at the other end.

"Uh, well, I think he was somewhat confused. Divorce is upsetting, as you know, even to the most intelligent people. You must have seen my correspondence to your lawyer?" I don't remember seeing any mention of George Collins. I try to imagine what would have led Peter to that conclusion.

"Well, yes, thank you," I say, to end the conversation.

"I'm sorry," he mutters. "Goodbye, Mrs. Simpson." I imagine him developing a compulsion to apologize to everyone he meets, feeling insanely responsible for bringing me bad tidings.

I write a note for Gloria, put on my coat and walk out to my car. I am a model of efficiency under stress. I am now the widow Simpson, and have a right to wear black. I don't expect to be haunted by ghostly appearances. Wherever Peter is now, his world will remain invisible to me until I enter it.

I can't help thinking of his loneliness, his fear, his rage, his desperate efforts to hold onto women who disappeared all the faster. I wonder about his last thoughts. A fear grabs me: could I be charged with contributing to Peter's death by some form of negligence, such as not being there? No, of course not. I will not be charged with anything.

However, when I see the body I am almost as distraught as the interested bystanders expect me to be. I haven't considered death to be so physical, so distorting, such a grotesque joke. But of course it happens to everyone sooner or later. After confirming that the broken hunk of flesh on the slab is Peter Simpson (or was), I run with as much dignity as possible to the nearest ladies' room where I can heave and heave, as though trying to spit out my own mortality.

I proceed to the undertaker who buried Peter's father. We discuss the price of caskets. I am being flooded with sympathy by everyone around me. I find the situation ironic, knowing they would never sympathize for my loss of trust, hope, dreams or self-respect were Peter still alive.

I come home, wondering how soon I will inherit my share of the estate. The property of convicted witches used to go to the inquisitors, but in this case I am the survivor. Peter was secretive about his bookkeeping. I have no idea how many debts will have to be cleared up, or how many mistresses will appear out of the mist of his past life. The other Mrs. Simpson will probably defend her children's interests, as she sees fit. A day of reckoning is at hand.

As I enter the house, Gloria rushes to hold me. We both need to sit down in the living room with stiff drinks to absorb the sudden end of my marriage, something we have looked forward to. "How do you feel?" she asks me earnestly.

"Stunned," I reply. "I can hardly believe it. I really didn't want him dead, Gloria, but my God, the man wasn't living in the real world." It occurs to me that I never really knew Peter, and that maybe no one ever really knows anyone else.

"I know, honey," she murmurs, giving me a melting look. "It's not your fault. You could say it was his karma. He was an alcoholic for years. I bet he had minor accidents for years too."

"He did," I say, remembering. "But how can we know this was really an accident?" I wonder whether Peter would have killed himself to make me feel guilty. "When I was with him, I kept hoping —"

"You didn't see the patterns in his behaviour. Or when you did, you thought your love could change him. Or you thought he needed more time to get over the stress of his last divorce, or his clients' problems. You thought his real personality came out during the good times."

"Yeah. I suppose I thought all those things. But —"

"And his professional status impressed you, as well as his income."

"That too," I say. "But his loneliness was real, you know, even if he brought it on himself." I picture Peter's bitter, self-justifying isolation as a cold black ocean in which he finally drowned.

"You weren't responsible for that," says Gloria. She is determined to release me from whatever power he still has. When we sit down to dinner, she has little trouble eating.

I cannot swallow food tonight. I am assailed by all my other desires: I want shameless sex, I want a good job offer, I want Gloria to love me forever, I want the power to seduce other people into satisfying my wants while I still have them. Gloria has similar wants, and a secret desire to match wits with strong-willed opponents. I wonder if I would have attracted her so much if I hadn't offered her the challenge of rescuing me from Peter — even though I escaped on my own, and would probably have survived without her.

I wonder if Gloria could seem so fearless and full of life without her property. I suppose she would be herself even if she lived in a slum, but how can I tell? I wonder how my life will change when I inherit from the dead, as she has. They say money is power.

After dinner, I stand in front of the big living room window, looking up at the moon. It looks like a lonely streetlamp in the dark, trackless expanse of space. Centuries ago, that moon shone on followers of the Old Religion who called on it for strength. Gloria and I are too rational for that, but our female energy pulses through this house as the blood courses through our bodies and flows out of us once a month. If most other people see the world by sunlight, we are night women with a different vision.

We will survive.

The Renegades

I'm sure I saw them when I was five or six years old, even though my mother says that's impossible. I remember a whole row of leather jackets lined up in the green shade of a tree-lined street in Hamlet, Ontario, during one of the long summers of my childhood. I couldn't tell whether most of the bikers were men or women, but in some cases I could see breasts, or something harder to define that let me know they were female. I can't remember seeing the name "Renegades" on their jackets, but several women had the same tattoos. The white ones were tanned or sunburned, and they all looked as if they'd been on the road for months. I thought there were hundreds of them. They rode hot metal, gleaming in the sunlight that filtered through the leaves. When they took off, the roar was deafening. The smell of dust hung in the air.

I was awe-struck and full of questions. "Why do those ladies ride motorcycles?" I asked my brother John. He was nine or ten, and I thought he should know. Eileen was only a year older than me, while Kevin was still in diapers. I didn't bother asking them.

"Those are all women who couldn't find husbands because they're too fat and ugly," John snickered. "They ride around because they have no place to live."

I asked our parents. "Ladies don't ride motorcycles," our mother said disapprovingly, "and I don't want you wandering off by yourself."

Dad frowned. "People who join gangs and ride motorcycles are very bad," he told me. "You should stay away from bad people. They could hurt you."

"They could kidnap us and hold us for ransom!" squealed John. He seemed to hope it would happen.

"They could not!" Eileen retorted. She was the realist in the family.

"Johnny!" our parents scolded in unison. "Stop scaring your sisters." I was terrified of the possibilities, but still awe-struck.

When I was eight, we moved to the Lakehead. There were more cars and more people, and Sacred Heart School seemed to be full of street-smart city kids. My best friend that year was a freckle-faced girl named Brenda who told me a lot about the Renegades.

"They come from the United States," she told me once during recess. "They're in the Mafia and they're real tough, even though they're all women. Don't ever argue with them."

"I won't," I said with conviction.

After school, Brenda continued telling me what I didn't know. "They go from town to town on their motorcycles and never settle down anywhere," she said. "Their husbands have to do all the housework because they're really scared of the women." I found it hard to picture scared men doing housework on motorcycles, but I didn't want to show my ignorance. "You should see what they do to people they don't like, Sandy," Brenda went on, her eyes widening. "They shoot their baddest enemies. If they just want to hurt someone, they cut them with knives or burn them with cigarette lighters or beat them up so they're in the hospital for a long time."

I shivered. "Why don't the police catch them?" I asked indignantly. I still had great faith in the police, the Church, the school system and my family.

"The cops are scared of them," said Brenda, looking strangely smug. "Nobody can catch them or do anything to them."

I reported Brenda's news at the supper table. "Oh, that's not true, Sandy," my mother laughed. "That girl just likes to make up stories to see if you'll believe them. The Renegades don't exist."

"Yeah," said Eileen. "You'll believe anything, Sandy."

"Some men in motorcycle gangs have girlfriends," Dad told me, obviously thinking I was old enough to hear a few of the unplesaant facts of life. "They're not very nice women." I wondered why my Dad didn't say anything about the men's lack of niceness.

When I was twelve, a confectionary store on the edge of the city was robbed by a gang. Several girls I knew said it was the Renegades.

"They tied up the man who runs the store," said my friend Darcy with relish, "then they cut off his dink and took all the money."

I felt sick. "They castrated him?" I asked. I was embarrassed, mostly because I suspected her of putting me on to gross me out.

"Yeah," said Darcy. "They always do that to men." By then, I had the sense to smell a fishy story when it was waved under my nose. All the same, the Renegades stayed in my mind as an image of everything wild and evil that I wasn't supposed to be. Everything men are afraid of in women.

When I reached my teens, the girls I knew were more interested in finding boyfriends than in hanging about with each other, so I stopped hearing anything new about the Renegades. Boys invited me out, and I usually went for something to do. I was slim with blonde hair and blue eyes, and that was all it took to impress some boys. In one way, dating was the easiest thing I had ever done. In another way, it was harder than a test in algebra.

Eileen loaned me her good sweater for my date with Ricky Fisch. He took me to MacDonald's after the movie, but I was too restless to focus on him. "Sandy," he was telling me, his voice cracking, "you're the only girl I —"

They were sitting two booths away. Somehow I knew they weren't ordinary girls like me because they looked experienced, like school dropouts. They wore leather jackets and no makeup. They smoked and swore casually in low voices. I was fascinated.

I excused myself to go to the ladies' room, so I could look at them on my way. "Hestia wouldn't but Maeve probably would," murmured one.

" — the way she did at the last dance," murmured the other. They were both snickering as I walked past.

The tattoo on one girl's arm looked strangely familiar, though I couldn't remember seeing it before. It was a picture of a black double-bladed axe with red and blue circles around it. She had a ring on every finger of that hand, and the rings looked almost like brass knuckles. They weren't exactly ugly, but they all looked solid and heavy, good for fighting.

I must have stared a little too long, because the girl gave me a steady look that forced me to look back at her. For a minute, my eyes were held by a pair of sharp grey ones that seemed old somehow, even though the rest of her looked about fifteen. She gave me a cool little smile. I was so shaken up that I couldn't wait to get back to Ricky.

"Girls always take so long," he grinned. "Finish your coke, then let's go park somewhere and talk." I was amazed at his gall.

"No," I said firmly. "After this, I have to be home." He didn't argue.

After that, I stopped letting Ricky tell me where he would take me, and I started telling him how I really felt about things. I also stopped borrowing Eileen's clothes, since they weren't really my style. I can't be sure any of this had to do with those girls in MacDonald's, but I know I felt different having seen them.

"Look, Sandy," Ricky told me on our fourth date, "that's just how it is. The guy is supposed to pay, so I get to have more of a say in what we do. You're not supposed to argue with me. Do you really want to pay for everything?"

I had no money of my own and Ricky knew it. My parents couldn't afford to give me much spending money, and they wouldn't let me or Eileen have after-school jobs because they wanted us to keep up our marks in school. I knew our parents wanted all us kids to get an education because they hoped it would keep us out of trouble.

"Go to hell!" I told Ricky. I hopped out of his parents' car and took off across the street.

"Hey, Sandy!" Ricky panted after me. "Come on now," he said, as if talking to a runaway horse that he wanted to coax back into the corral. "Hey now, come on. You don't have to be upset. I don't mind paying your way, honest, Sandy. You're the nicest girl I've ever gone with." He would never, never, never understand, even if I spent days explaining how I felt.

"I'm sorry I got mad at you," I said quietly. "We just don't belong together, Ricky. You need to find someone else."

"Oh, hey, b- b- but, Sandy —" he spluttered. "You don't really mean that. I mean now, hey, get serious." I insisted that he take me home. Finally he did.

Ricky started phoning me every day after school. He cried and told me he wanted to marry me someday. I told him he didn't really know me, so he could hardly love me. He told me I was acting like a man-hater and that was the problem in our relationship. I told him we never had a relationship until I started speaking my mind. I needed an income and I needed it soon.

The Table-Rite grocery store advertised part-time employment in the newspaper, and that's how I landed my first job. The first evening I went to work, I told my family I was going to Darcy's house to study. The second, I told them I was going to the library. The third, I said I was meeting Ricky downtown.

I got found out on my fourth day of work. "Sandra," my Dad said glowering, "your mother phoned your friends Darcy and Ricky. Would you mind explaining why you lied to us?"

"I'm working!" I announced proudly. I really wanted to tell him anyway. "You can't make me quit," I said. "I'm sick of having no money, so I got a job. I still have time to study, Dad, and I'm passing everything. Anyway, I'm a woman of sixteen." That clinched the argument for me.

"As long as you're living under our roof," shouted my red-faced father, "you'll live by our rules! I'm the breadwinner in this family, and I can support my children until you all finish school. Your mother and I don't forbid you to do things because we like doing it, we do it for your own good." Calming down a bit, he said, "If you like, I'll come with you to tell the store manager why you're quitting."

"Go to hell!" I yelled back, grabbing my jacket and my purse. I ran out the door, and all the way to Cheryl's house. When I got there, I told her and her separated mother what was happening. I picked Cheryl because there were no men in her family, so I thought I had a better chance of getting listened to.

Cheryl's mother said I could stay overnight if I phoned home. When I did, my Dad was so furious that I hung up on him. "Well, now my folks know where I am," I told Cheryl's mum, "so they won't worry."

In the morning I went to school with Cheryl, but I couldn't concentrate. I didn't want to go home after school, so I hung about downtown until it was time for work.

"You were supposed to be here yesterday!" yelled the manager. "If you don't want this job, I can find someone who does." I had to apologize, but I wanted to hit someone.

After work I went to the Burger Shack and ordered a sundae, wondering what to do. Then I saw her. She walked in like someone who would rather be in the open air, her brown braid swinging against the back of her leather jacket. She was slim, but she looked strong. She was wearing a silver necklace with a double-bladed axe on it, and the same symbol was tattooed on her skin, beneath the open collar of her shirt. She had a little tattoo of a flower on her smooth cheek.

I looked at her until she looked back at me. "Hope you don't mind," she said, sliding onto the chair across from mine.

I was dumbfounded. "I'm Zenobia," she said politely, stretching out an arm to shake hands with me. I thought her name was strange, but then nothing about her was ordinary.

"Sandy," I muttered.

"Come with me for a ride on my bike," she said calmly, "when you're finished." Her look suggested lots of possibilities. I was thrilled and aghast.

"Um," I murmured, meaning yes. Riding in the dark with one headlight seemed dangerous, but I didn't see what I had to lose.

I sat behind her with my arms around her waist. We seemed to go incredibly fast, the wind whipping all around us. I wasn't afraid.

Zenobia drove us all the way out of town, then turned off the road near a clump of trees. I got off first, shivering in the early spring air. I didn't want to sit down on the muddy grass.

"You're cold," she suggested in a warm voice. Before I could tell what she had in mind, she wrapped her arms around me. If a guy had done that I would have pushed him away, but I didn't know how to deal with sexual advances from a girl.

"Zenobia," I said, trying out her exotic name. I wasn't sure whether I was trying to tell her to go slow because I was confused, or to go ahead because I wanted her, or to go away and leave me alone.

"Let's talk first," she whispered. The word "first" almost made me want to go on to whatever would come next. Obviously it was more than a hug. "Something's bothering you," she said wisely. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"I don't want to go home," I sighed. To my horror, tears welled up in my eyes, and I hoped I could keep them from spilling down my face. "My parents think I'm a baby." I could feel a hot lump of anger, frustration and disappointment welling up in my chest. "Zenobia," I asked desperately, "do your parents let you work?"

She was amused. "I've been earning my keep since I was six years old."

I gasped. "Didn't you have to go to school?" She looked old enough to have graduated.

"Not as you do," she told me, "but I've learned what I need to know. I'm still learning. You're really unhappy, aren't you?"

That did it. I started sniffing and crying, right in front of her. "I don't know what to do!" I burst out. "I suppose my parents are right when they say I can't get good marks if I'm working, and I need good marks to graduate and get a job or get into university, but if I can't pay for anything it gives everybody the right to walk all over me. So I need a job, but the only ones I can get are the ones no one else wants, with a boss breathing down my neck. I get enough of that from my family." I was running out of steam.

Zenobia never let go of me. As I paused for breath, she pulled me closer and gently wiped the tears away from my eyes. "You don't have to live that way, Sandy," she whispered. I wanted to ask if she was one of the Renegades, but if they were a myth, that would be like asking if she was the Tooth Fairy.

"What do you mean?" I whispered back. Instead of answering, she gave me a long kiss. Or maybe that was her answer, since it certainly carried a meaning. I felt as if I would melt.

I kept telling myself I wasn't really a lesbian, that I was just responding to the strangeness of the whole situation mixed with my desperate feelings. Whatever it was, I knew I wanted her. Just once, I thought to myself, I really want it just once, so I'll have something to remember. Zenobia seemed soft and strong, gentle and determined at the same time. She was warmer than I.

I didn't see how we could remove enough of our clothes to touch each other the way we wanted without freezing, but somehow we managed. I backed up against a

tree, with Zenobia pressed against me. Our breath formed faint clouds of steam that made us laugh. I could see the full moon shining down on us like an old silver coin.

I knew my crotch was wet when Zenobia touched me there, and I could even hear the slippery sound of her fingers moving over my most sensitive parts. I felt as if part of me was an ancient clam that was homesick for the ocean I had never seen.

I knew she wouldn't go inside me without some encouragement, so I grabbed her hand and gently pressed downward. Soon she was far enough in to make me uncomfortable, but I wanted her to keep going. When she finally pulled her hand away, one finger had some blood on it. I saw it as soon as she did. "There," I whispered, as though I had just sworn an oath in blood.

"Sandy," she moaned in my ear. "Baby, I didn't know." Then she whispered some words I couldn't understand.

"It's all right," I murmured. "I wanted it. It's all right." Better you than Ricky, I thought. Much better.

She seemed disturbed, so I became more aggressive. I kissed her until she responded, and I held her small, firm breasts as if to tell them that youth can survive anything. I felt awkward when I went further, but her responses helped guide me. I was surprised when she seemed to have a mild epileptic fit, but then I realized that was probably an orgasm. I was impressed.

I suddenly thought of a reason why she was more experienced than I was. "Zenobia," I asked, "do you have a boyfriend?"

"Hell, no," she answered slowly. I was taken aback.

"I was just asking," I mumbled. Wow, I thought. She's probably not much older than me, but she's already an experienced lesbian. I wondered whether her relatives suspected.

"Sandy," she said urgently, "you can come back to the camp with me. You can join the — (here she used a Gaelic-sounding word I didn't recognize). You haven't got a bike, but you can ride with me until you get your own."

Her offer took my breath away. "I don't know," I mumbled. I began wondering what I was getting into. "Do you live on bikes?" I asked, feeling ignorant. "And camp out?"

Zenobia looked like someone who can't imagine how to explain her culture to someone who can't even speak the language. "Girl," she said, looking me in the eyes, "it would be a rough life for you, but other women have done it. If you don't want to go home, you can come with me." She looked older than she had a minute before. "I owe you something," she explained, "for your initiation."

I was embarrassed. "You don't owe me anything," I muttered. "Who do you live with, and where do you work?"

"I ride with my mother and the others," she said, "and we never stay in one place longer than it takes. But Sandy," she pointed out, "we can't tolerate informers. If you come with me, you'll probably never see your family again."

I felt faint. I tried to imagine living for years and years without ever seeing my hard-headed parents or my brothers and my sister. I realized I would miss all of them. Not to mention Grandad and Grandmum and my aunts and uncles and cousins. I looked at Zenobia, and I knew she knew. "I can't do it," I said.

"I know," she answered. All this time, she had been carving out a stick with a small but razor-sharp knife that gleamed in the moonlight. "I usually do this better," she murmured, to change the subject. I concentrated on watching her. "At least you can see what it is," she said, more to herself than to me.

There was no sound but the soft "wnk, whk" of her knife scraping the wood. Finally she finished, though she didn't look satisfied. "There," she said, handing me a little wooden replica of her own knife. "A knife to cut out the old and to point the way." She looked at me. "A knife to sever. But don't forget who made it for you." We held each other, shivering. "Come on," she said. "I'll take you home."

We rode straight though town to my parents' house. I knew it was late, and I was afraid of what I had to face. "Will I ever see you again?" I asked her.

"I hope so," said Zenobia, "but I can't promise that." She looked at me as if to say that it really depended on me. We had one last kiss. Then she roared off toward the highway, leaving me alone.

When I opened the door, my family came toward me from all sides. "Sandy!" yelled my parents in unison.

"You're in trouble!" gloated Kevin.

"Where have you been?" yelled my father.

"Where's Ricky?" demanded Eileen.

"We were worried sick!" yelled my mother. She was holding Patrick, the baby. "We phoned the Carsons, the Browns, the Haggertys, the hospital, the police —"

"Dumb move, Sandy," said John, looming over me.

I took a deep breath. "I'm sorry," I forced myself to say. "I'm sorry I worried you. I'm not keeping that job. I just needed time to think. I'll buckle down to study, and I won't do things like this anymore." Everybody kept talking to me without listening, so I had to repeat the same speech: "I'm sorry. I just needed time. I won't do it again."

I quit my job and resigned myself to studying at the library after school. Eventually I graduated from grade 13 with a bursary and a class pin. My whole family came to my graduation and Eileen brought her pushy new husband.

I went straight into university and majored in sociology. Since meeting Zenobia, I was interested in learning about sex roles in different cultures.

During my third year, I met Abe. He was a sociology major like me, and I really thought he had a scholarly mind. I also liked his slim body and his intense dark beard; he had the look of a nineteenth-century European revolutionary in his youth. All our relatives were shocked because he was Jewish and I Catholic, so we moved in together to spite them all.

"It goes to show," said Abe when he heard my stories about the Renegades, though I pointed out that I didn't believe everything I heard. "It goes to show there's a storytelling tradition in every culture," he said. "It seems to be a basic human urge, in spite of the mass media." He seemed pleased at this evidence of grass-roots independence and inventiveness. "Were those stories mostly passed around by Catholic girls?"

I thought about it. "Most of the kids I knew were Catholic girls," I said, "at Sacred Heart and then at St. Jude's, but I just assumed that everybody knew about the

Renegades." I wondered whether Protestant or Jewish stories about the gang would be different from the ones I was told.

"You should write down all the details you can remember," Abe urged. "Did you ever read anything about an all-girl gang?"

"No," I said. "I don't think any men believed in them. My brothers never did, past a certain age."

"So those stories are part of a feminine sub-culture," Abe glowed, an academic who had just made an important discovery. "Women should preserve that kind of thing and not be ashamed of it," he instructed. "It's not a sign of inferiority."

He was probably the best man I could hope to find, but I still didn't tell him about Zenobia. I didn't feel the time was right.

While we were both studying for final exams, I found out I was pregnant. I was using a diaphragm because it seemed less drastic than the pill, even though I knew it was less reliable. I realized what was wrong even before I took the test.

I found a doctor as fast as possible, and was scheduled for a hearing with the hospital abortion committee. My family would have been scandalized, but they didn't have to know.

I was young and healthy, and must not have seemed suicidal. My request was turned down. When I desperately phoned a friend who used to work at the Women's Centre, she told me more women were being turned down since the clinic had been closed. "You can try a different hospital," she said, "or better still, go to the States if you can afford it. I don't know who's doing backstreet jobs anymore."

I took the bus to New York state, but wouldn't let Abe come with me. I went to a clinic where I was relieved of my burden. My initiation as a baby-killer cost most of my savings, and more blood than I expected.

I was still losing gallons of blood while I wrote my exams. I looked as pale and weak as a martyred virgin or a sinner tortured by remorse. Abe tiptoed around me and did more housework than usual.

"Look at this," he said one morning, pushing the newspaper at me. We used to discuss the news. Two members of the hospital board that turned me down had been found stabbed to death, and both men had been marked on the hands with the sign of a double-bladed axe. There were no leads.

"Men killed in a bizarre pattern," I heard on the news a few days later. Three men in nearby towns had been stabbed and marked in the same way as the doctors. My friend from the Women's Centre wondered if it was just a coincidence that all three had raped women who had come to the Centre for counselling. None of the men had been convicted.

Abe was disturbed. "We're living in a violent society, Sandy," he complained. "None of us are safe. This kind of thing was happening in Germany before the Nazis took over."

I was confused. "You mean men were raping women?" I asked. "Or men were being killed by people who left mysterious clues?"

"It wasn't mysterious," he said sarcastically. "The victims were mostly Jews and union leaders who were killed in their beds while the establishment looked the

other way. This government has a lot of the same attitudes. There's always more crime under fascism."

Abe and I could agree on one point. We both saw those killings as a sign of something. I hardly dared hope that Zenobia was nearby, but I was glad I had stained and shellacked my little knife, and drilled a hole in the handle so I could wear it on a chain. If I ever needed a sign, I had it.

I was eating lunch with Abe in Harriet's Lunch Box when three women in leather jackets walked in. One looked about fifty, one about thirty, and one was a young teenager. The grown women had tattoos and an outdoor look that reminded me of wind and spring grass. The girl looked self-conscious, imitating her companions. I wondered whether she had taken a new name, and whether she already had a lover. I wondered what she would be like at my age. I wondered where the women got the money they spent in fast food joints.

"Sandy," Abe was saying, "are you listening?"

"Sorry," I sighed.

I thought of going to the outskirts of town to look for the women's camp, but shyness stopped me. What would I do if I found them? What could I say to them? How could I leave everyone I knew, and disappear into space? I couldn't.

Abe and I got our degrees at the same time. Our families were proud. Our parents were almost resigned to our relationship, still wishing we would only get married. Eileen and John both brought their spouses and kids to my graduation, so I had a big enough cheering section. Abe hinted to me that a summer wedding would be picturesque. I told him we couldn't afford any extra expenses.

Abe wants to forge ahead, so he's taking summer classes towards his Master's degree. I want to be the breadwinner, so I have a summer job assisting a prof who is doing a survey of Irish-Canadian families in the area. The work interests me because it involves people I know. I thought that was why I was hired in the first place, but it seems there were other reasons.

I wish Dr. Brown would keep his hands and his comments to himself. He says he's being 'friendly'. I tell him we're supposed to have a working relationship. A lot of what he tells me to do could be classed as non-research, but I need the modest salary.

Somehow I've fallen into the habit of doing most of the laundry and cooking at home. It annoys me, but it's easier than arguing with Abe about whose turn it is and how much reading he has to do.

Abe often brings home a bottle of wine as a peace offering. "*L'chaim,*" he says over dinner, raising his glass.

Sometimes I propose a toast and we clink glasses, looking at each other with a kind of impersonal good will. Lately I have the strangest feeling that Abe and I are temporarily on the same bus, but that we're really going in different directions. Meanwhile, we've enjoyed each other's company.

"Martial Law on P.E.I.," screamed the headline a few weeks ago, during our annual heat wave. The newspaper claimed that Prince Edward Island had been overrun by bike gangs from Ontario and Quebec, and that islanders were panicking. Clashes between police and bikers had left dozens dead, though it wasn't explained to

my satisfaction how the rioting started. News stories gave the impression that all the bikers were men.

I've eaten lunch at Harriet's every day for a week, looking for a sign. Yesterday I got it. A dark young woman with wiry black hair sat down across from me. We exchanged a steady look for a minute before she spoke. "Sandy McGinnis?"

"That's me," I said softly, smiling at her.

"Something for you," said the woman, handing me a crumpled piece of paper. She left before I could open it.

My hands were shaking slightly as I smoothed out the paper on the table top. It said:

Now or Never.

Three miles outside city limits

on old highway near turnoff,

12:00 midnight Lammas Eve.

There was no signature of any kind.

Today is July 31, Lammas Eve. I packed some clothes, foodstuff, camping gear and my tape recorder, because I don't know what I'll need. I put everything where Abe won't see it when he comes home. I have no motorcycle, so I'll have to take the car. If I go.

The smooth little knife is in my pocket, where I can touch it. Oh, Zenobia, where are you now?

I wonder what the women do to informers and deserters. I wonder how they react to social scientists who want to document their lifestyle. I wonder if they would accept a translator or go-between, someone who could intercede for them with the authorities of the male-run world.

I feel like praying, but not in the way I was taught. The wind, the sun, the stars, and the road are their reality, so they probably pray for good weather to a goddess of the natural world. Hail Mother, full of change, be with me now and for the rest of my life.

Darlin' Corey

I sort of have to thank my old man Phil for leaving me when he did. If he'd been a better provider, I never would have gone to Welfare and met Corey. When I was married I never thought I would end up living with a woman like this, but of course I didn't know Corinne Pappas in those days. What I didn't know then would fill a book.

I grew up in Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan, but my folks grew up on the farm. They're very independent, and they raised us kids to be the same way. When I was growing up, I was known as a typical stubborn redhead. That's probably why I married Phil right after I graduated from grade 12, even though my Dad said he had the brains and morals of a billy goat. Phil was short but solid, and he couldn't express his feelings the way I did. I thought I could bring out his potential.

"I gotta go talk to the guys, Angie," Phil used to say before he went partying.

After the first time he stayed away for three days, I used to remark when he returned, "Had a nice long talk, eh?" but he never picked up on my sarcasm. That's what I got for encouraging him to open up.

I have to admit the man could hold his liquor and work hard if he wanted to. We moved to Regina, where he worked in different garages for several years until we decided to start a family. Yes, I know that was probably dumb, but I wanted a baby and I really thought he was improving at a natural pace, like a puppy dog being housetrained.

Phil had a fight with his boss and got fired when I was five months along with Gail. It wasn't the first time. "Get off my back, you nagging bitch!" he yelled when I asked why he was let go. All I did was ask, but I guess he was sensitive on that point. After that, I tried not to talk to him if I could avoid it because it didn't get us anywhere. We had a really quiet marriage until after I came home from the hospital with my little angel. Gail used to cry a lot, as babies do, and it really got on Phil's nerves.

"Kids need a full night's sleep, Angie," he told me a few times, "but you always coddle her when she wakes up. By the time she's big enough, she'll be giving you lickins." Once, after he'd said this, he looked at her a long time. "She don't look much like me," he muttered.

That remark made me sick, especially since I'd been at home for the past year while Phil had been hanging out with his friends. "What the hell does that mean?" I glared at him. "If you don't think you're Gail Ann's father, you can damn well come

with me to see a divorce lawyer, and you can sign a paper saying you give up all visiting rights. Then I'll change our names back to Sawchuk." Phil must have known I meant business, because he couldn't look me in the eyes.

"Damn," he muttered, grabbing his old leather jacket. "I'm going out for awhile." That was the last I heard of him for seven years.

By the time he was gone for his usual three days, we had no food and no money to buy any. Somehow I knew he wasn't coming back, and we were in debt on top of it. I phoned around, but of course Phil's drinking buddies said they hadn't seen him. I swallowed my pride and asked my Mum to bring us some groceries from her freezer, but no way was I going back to Moose Lips with a newborn baby and no husband. I would have felt like a sixteen-year-old in trouble, and that's how I would have been treated. Mum was beside herself, praying to God for my soul, but I knew I was right.

When she left, I knew I had to face the welfare office because I had no other choice. I couldn't even walk the streets if I'd wanted to, so soon after having a baby.

When I got there with Gail, I knew they'd make us wait a long time, so I stated my case right off. "I need a cheque today," I told the little woman at the reception desk. "And I need more than food, so don't send me to the Food Bank. I'm a single parent and I need money for necessities." I think I scared her a little and that made me feel better.

Even still, we waited for over an hour before I got to talk to Corey, the social worker. I was surprised to see her comfortable figure in pants, and the distinguished touch of silver in her black hair. Somehow I had always thought social workers were prissy young women right out of school. But I wasn't willing to back down. "No one in my family has ever been on welfare," I told her, "and I wouldn't be here if my husband hadn't deserted me. I plan to go back to work as soon as I can."

She smiled, and I thought she was being condescending. "No problem," she said, meaning she could give me a cheque right away. "You're a special needs case."

"I'm not a *case*, Mrs. Pappas," I told her firmly. "I'm a mother by choice. If you want me to sign a form saying I'll pay back the money, I will."

She smiled as if I had told a good joke. "Don't worry about it," she said. "I'm not married. Call me Corinne and I'll call you Angela." When she told me she would visit from time to time, I felt as if I was back at home with all the neighbourhood gossips tracking through my parents' kitchen to look at me and the baby.

When Corinne dropped in on me a few days later, the house was spotless and I was exhausted. It was spring, and every time I went in or out I left black mud on the floor. There was still some snow in the shade, and it was turning my yard into a slough. The only way to keep a clean home was to stay indoors.

"You've got a cozy place here," said Corinne, even though she should have known the shack wasn't worth what the landlord was charging.

"We repainted all the rooms," I told her, "and Phil put a new floor in the bathroom. We did our own repairs, and we had to pay for the supplies ourselves."

"You make a place look like home," she said, giving me a deep smile. I was at a loss, since I hadn't expected her to say anything like that. I felt myself blushing. I felt as if she had peeked in my closets and basement when I didn't want her to. I was

about to ask if she was finished her inspection of my premises when she noticed Gail in her little carry-cot.

"Can I hold her?" she asked. I couldn't say no to the woman who held the purse-strings.

Little Gail looked at home in Corey's arms, even that first time, though she threw up sour milk all over her blue sweater. I was so embarrassed I could have died. Corey laughed. "She seems to be well fed," she remarked. I was breast-feeding, so this remark was even more embarrassing. I apologized a lot, and brought Corey a washcloth.

Next time Corinne came over, she brought disposable diapers, baby clothes, apples, bananas, lamb chops, perogies and a blueberry pie. I invited her for supper, but was surprised when she stayed because I thought that was against the rules. She gave me a recipe for baklava after I told her I liked it.

I didn't want to like Corey, but I just couldn't help it. When I look back, I remember thinking there was something different about her. She hardly ever talked about men, and when she did, it wasn't in a romantic connection. She could always find other things to talk about, and she knew a lot more than I about some things. She brought me psychology books on how to recover from a bad relationship and take charge of your life. I wished I could be more like her.

When Corey brought me flowers and wine, I said, "I don't know what to say. I've never been courted before." I wanted her to know I was beginning to catch on.

Corey laughed and raised an eyebrow. "Didn't the Big Man ever bring you presents?" She meant Phil, and it bothered me to think of Corey having anything to do with him. I opened my mouth to ask what she knew about him, but she interrupted me. "Well, how does it feel to be courted?" she grinned, watching me with her big dark eyes.

"Strange," I replied, then let out a guffaw. "I never expected it to be like this, but nothing ever happens to me the way I expect." The look on Corey's face reminded me of two girls I had really liked when I was in school, but I had never thought of all the possibilities before.

I'm not the one to do things halfway, and it had been a long time, if you see what I mean. I turned on the radio. "Do you like to dance, Corinne?" I asked. It took her a second to catch my drift and then I think she was amazed at my nerve. I started dancing without her, just to show what I meant. I know I dance well because Phil used to say no decent married woman would move her body like that in public.

Corey moved in and put her arms around me. She felt soft, warm and strong. She wasn't wiry like Phil, but I liked her body better than his. I wondered how many girlfriends she'd had before me, and I was jealous of them. "Do they really let you do this?" I asked suspiciously, meaning the welfare office.

"Are you kidding?" she chuckled in my ear. "I could be out on the street in a minute. That's why I won't be your social worker anymore. You're getting someone else." I looked at her in a panic. "But I'm not leaving!" she chuckled, seeing my look.

"You better not," I whispered fiercely in her ear. "I know where to find you and I don't like being crossed."

"I won't cross you, Mother," she whispered back. She's been calling me that ever since.

About a year after our first dance, the three of us moved into our own home in the Cathedral area, with trees all along our street. By then, Corey had transferred to the centre for delinquent girls. The government was always threatening to shut the place down to save money, and that took our minds off the fear that someone at the centre would figure out why Corey was living with a welfare mother.

"I need a job, Corey," I said. "I hate not working. I'll see if they'll take me on again at the Prairie Inn."

My partner gave me her doubtful look. "Did you like serving booze to drunks?" Corey can be really direct.

I laughed, but couldn't look her in the eyes. "It wasn't that bad," I said. "You just have to know how to handle them." But the thought hit me: No more, no way can I stand men approaching me in the bar the way they do. I'd probably get into a fight and lose my job, like Phil. "What else can I do?" I asked.

"Get employment counselling. Take a trades course," she answered. I knew Corey wanted to see me in a hard hat, giving orders to six men on a construction site. I didn't want to let her down, but not all women are cut out for that sort of thing. Even women like us.

"Corey," I said, feeling stupid, "I know you want me to be ambitious, but in some ways I'm just an ordinary woman." I wondered what she saw in me and suddenly had the urge to cry. "I'm not good at.." The words stuck in my throat.

She held me against her full chest. "You're not ordinary, Mother," she said. "You're good with your daughter, you're a good cook and seamstress, you could be good at other things too. You'll know what, and you'll know when to start. In the meanwhile, you're good enough for me." Corey is that understanding most of the time.

When Gail was eighteen months old, I put her in day care and went to business college. I learned how to type with flying fingers, balance books, and enter data in some high-tech machines. The job I got after graduation was fairly interesting, and it paid a lot better than welfare. Or marriage. I knew I would probably move on someday, but at the time I was proud of what I could do.

"Wake up time!" Gail used to say when she jumped into bed with us at seven in the morning. She was better at waking up than we were, and she had more energy than a barrel of monkeys. Sometimes she would sing us a serenade. "Darlin' Corey," she would sing, "wake up, wake up."

Corinne and I had the same taste in music, so my kid was growing up on country and western. I had a guitar and a banjo that I tried to play, but I was better at playing the stereo or the tape deck. I taped some of my old folk and bluegrass records with songs on them about a character named Darlin' Corey, who does everything from selling her own moonshine to leaving men heartbroken. Gail got a kick out of those songs because she thought they were about our own Corey, and Corey got a kick out of our daughter's singing. "Just wait," Corey used to say, "she'll be on a stage someday."

Not that we always got along. I'm fairly particular about the company I keep, and I never liked some of the women that had been hanging around Corey since their teenage school days. I thought Corey should have outgrown those broads after twenty years, but they stuck to her like glue.

"Don't they have homes of their own?" I asked Corey once after Bill, Leona, Les and Crystal had sat around until we had to invite them to stay for supper.

Corey laughed. "We don't see them that often, Angel," she replied, as though that should answer my question.

"Often enough," I said. "Have you noticed how they never leave 'til they're fed?"

Corey gave me her Old Dyke sermon: "Angie, you don't know what it was like to be a gay teenager in this town in the 60s. Some butches used to disguise themselves as boys so they could go out with their girlfriends. The older generation thought we were all freaks, and so did the other kids in school, if they knew. We had to stick together. For as often as Bill and Les come over, you can try to be friendly."

That stopped me in my tracks. Usually Corey is so good to me that I run out of steam when she argues back. "Okay, I'll try," I said, "but I don't know how a feminist like you can have butch and femme friends. It must bother your conscience." Corey laughed, but I hoped she would think about that little point.

Bill, whose real name was Isabel Pasqua, probably weighed three hundred pounds, give or take a few. She always sounded hoarse and loud, and most people thought she was a man. Her friend Les was a pale scrawny woman who tried to look as tough as possible in a little black leather jacket and matching size 5 boots. She had red hair like me, but there the resemblance ended.

Bill and Les had two girlfriends that were femmier than any of the other wives I had known when I was married. Leona chewed gum all the time and wore more makeup than an actress. She wore a necklace that looked like a little gold spoon on a chain, and thought that this made her real cool. Crystal was a washed-out blonde with tattoos who always looked sick, as if she would faint if you breathed on her.

When these four jokers walked into my house, Bill and Les would say something like, "Hey Angie, you're lookin' good," in a sly way that I didn't appreciate. Then they'd raise their voices and holler, "Hey, Corey!" as if she was at the other end of a football field. Leona and Crystal simpered through all this, then they sat down, Leona whipped out a lipstick and traced her lips while studying her face in my kettle. Corey offered them coffee or beer, and I usually found something to do with Gail upstairs.

Sometimes I would overhear their conversations. Les usually said, "Core, man, I know where we can get some good stuff. Come with us to the Alexandra."

"Wo, hey, Les," said Corey, "you know I'm not into that any more. I've got two people to think of besides myself."

At that point, one of the femmes giggled and said, "Turn her on too, Core. She'd love it."

Then Corey said something like: "You don't know her. I advise you women not to try selling my better half anything she doesn't want. And don't even talk about it around Gail."

Then all four would mutter things like, "Oh, gee, we wouldn't," and "Core, man we love kids," and "Hey, we wouldn't interefere with your family." I tried not to listen.

Once when Bill and Leona came over on a Saturday, I heard Bill say, "Guess who's coming back to town?"

"Maggie and Karen?" asked Corey.

"No," said Leona in the Marilyn Monroe voice she tries to put on. "No one like that, dear. A man we like to do business with."

A firecracker laugh burst out of Bill. "Speak for yourself, baby," she told Leona. "I just like to score what he sells."

"Somebody's ex-old man," hinted Leona.

"Some little person's Daddy," hinted Bill.

Gail heard that remark and let out a shriek of joy. "Daddy!" she screeched. I was trying to put a shirt on her, but she started pulling it off. She was three years old and really stubborn. She went running downstairs with the shirt half on and me on her tail. "Where's my Daddy?" she asked those women before I could stop her. Gail knew that some kids have men in their lives called Daddies, and she wanted one too.

"Isn't she cute?" said Crystal in her mindless way.

"Where's my Daddy?" yelled Gail. She demanded an answer.

I grabbed my kid, struggling. "You need more clothes on, young lady," I told her.

"Do you want to see your Dad?" Bill asked her.

"I don't," I told Bill, looking her straight in the eyes. "If Phil comes here, he's not getting past my door." Gail whined until I let go, and then grabbed some cookies on the table, her eyes wide with excitement.

Corey grinned. "Just let him try it," she egged me on. "The troops have been called out." She made me laugh, though I was slightly annoyed that she could tease me that way in front of those women.

"How do you know Phil, anyway?" I asked Bill. She seemed like the ringleader, so I figured she was the one to ask.

All four of them laughed. "He used to be a popular man around here," said Les.

"The Man to Know," giggled Crystal.

"He got a little too popular," said Leona. That got more laughs. "Had to go bye-bye," she smirked, looking at Gail.

"I've heard about enough," I said through clenched teeth. "If you know where Phil is and you think he's so smart, you can all go join him. I don't want to know anything about it and I don't want to hear his name in my house." I could have heard a pin drop.

"Angela —" said Les in a more respectful voice.

"I want to keep that man out of my life," I told them. "He's got nothing to do with us or Gail any more. If you're his friends, you're no friends of mine."

Everyone started talking at once. "Angela," said Les, giving me this deep, sincere look, "we know how you feel."

"We didn't mean to offend you," gushed Leona.

"He's not our friend," Bill insisted. "We don't make friends with guys like that."

I took three cookies out of Gail's little hands. "Come on, munchkin," I muttered, and lugged her back upstairs so I wouldn't have to hear more bullshit. Or as the case may be, cowshit.

I didn't hear any more about Phil for a few years until he just showed up on our doorstep to cause trouble. "Angela, how ya doin'?" he said as though he hadn't been away for seven years. "I thought I'd stop by and see how you are. I hear you're a working woman. How's my little girl?"

I tried to shut the door in his face, but Gail called out, "Who's there, Mum?"

Phil broke into a grin and yelled back, "It's your Dad!" Gail was thrilled to have a real Daddy like other kids, so she let out a shriek and ran into his arms.

I could hardly stand to speak to that slimy snake, but I don't think parents should argue in front of their children, so I let him in.

"Coffee?" I asked him. He nodded. I was really tempted to pour it on his head, but instead I asked, "How many cops are after you, Phil?" I tried to sound conversational.

He choked. "Angie," he said, sounding shocked, "you know I don't break the law."

"Is it just dope," I asked him calmly, "or do you sell hot items or women or do little jobs on people for the right price?"

I liked watching my ex turn purple, and it didn't look flattering on a man who's been burning himself out for years on god knows what. He got mad. "Who's been telling you that crap?" His voice was threatening.

"Never mind," I answered. "I know what a responsible husband and father you are, so I just figured."

Phil gave me a serious look out of his baby-blue eyes. "Let me tell you something," he lectured. "A man needs a woman who can believe in him. Any man, I don't care if it's the prime minister or the guy that picks up the garbage, he's got to feel like he can make it and have someone on his side. Angie, I know you thought I didn't stay home enough, but you were always running me down. No man wants to come home to that."

"Then what the hell are you doing here, Phil?" I asked.

The look on his face turned pitiful. "Angela, I know we've had our ups and downs, but we need to stick together for the sake of this sweet little girl." Gail was sitting on his lap like a kid half her age. I could hardly stand it, but after all, he was her father. "Look at us," he whined, looking around my kitchen. "Here you are living with another woman who couldn't find a husband, if you'll pardon the expression, and I'm not getting any younger either. We should let bygones be bygones and not carry a grudge."

"You want money, don't you?" I asked him, cold as ice.

Phil looked troubled, as if he was starting to realize how much gall he had. "Just until next week, Angie," he wheedled.

"Fuckin' Christ!" I yelled, not even minding Gail. She was in grade two, and I knew she had heard things on the schoolgrounds. "You get your sleazy ass out of my

kitchen before I throw you out! Why the hell should I give a damn if you starve to death? You were always a jerk to me, and you haven't changed."

Gail hopped off Phil's lap and ran to me, her eyes wide. All my shouting was scaring her. "Momma," she said, pulling my arm. "You're not supposed to yell at my Dad! It's not nice to use those words."

I could see she was about to cry, and that made me feel a little ashamed. "It's all right, honey," I told her. "I won't swear any more."

Phil was slinking toward the door. "Well, Angie," was his parting shot, "you've still got your temper, so you can just go on living by yourself because I don't know any man that would get turned on by that kind of talk." I was about to tell him where to go, but he was out the door before I got the chance.

I was still shaking when Corey got home. I wanted to go to the cops and take out a peace bond to keep him off our property, but she calmed me down and talked me out of it. "Wait and see," she said. "If you're patient enough, old Phil might just shoot himself in the foot." I told her I'd rather shoot him myself, someplace higher up.

Two days later, he had the nerve to phone. "I knew it! I knew it!" he yelled, spitting into the phone.

"What do you know?" I asked, dead-pan.

"You're a sex pervert! You're living with that woman and having sex with her in front of my daughter! You're not fit to raise a child! It's a good thing I came back to town! It makes me sick to think how you're raising that innocent little girl! I should have known you were a butch lesbian from the way you always tried to wear the pants! I'm going to expose you to the authorities, lady! It's about time —" I slammed down the receiver.

As soon as I had time to think, I started worrying. I didn't think Phil really wanted custody of Gail, but I knew he might try for it just to spite me. I remembered my mother telling me I had a responsibility to meet my husband's needs, and I thought a male judge would think I was an unfit mother, considering my failure as a wife.

Sick fear invaded my body like a deadly disease. I knew Phil could cause all kinds of trouble for me, not to mention Corey. If Phil's lifestyle didn't impress the judge any better than mine, Gail could end up in a foster home. I asked Corey if she would consider moving to another province, but she said no. She looked grim, as if she was determined to stick it out no matter what.

Gail picked up on my fear. "Mum, why does my Dad want to take me away?" she asked in a little voice. "He could move in with us, and then we'd be a whole family." I could have cried.

I pulled her onto my lap, though she was really too big for that. "Gail honey," I said softly, "you'll never have a Dad who lives with you, so you might as well get used to it. He just wants to make trouble and take you away from us, but we can't let him. Honey, you can't tell anyone that Corey and I sleep in the same bed, okay? Nobody."

"I know, Mum," she said, sounding annoyed. We had gone over this before. Gail was very quiet for the rest of the evening and I felt as if the days of music and courtship had gone forever. None of us were babies any more.

Phil was full of surprises. A week later, he phoned me again. "Very funny," he said. "You and your girlfriend think you're smart, don't you?" This time, I was afraid to answer him. I wondered whether the conversation was being taped. "That car is going to cost $3,000 to fix up and I'm going to make you pay!" he yelled. "You're not getting away with this, you stupid bitch." I hung up quietly.

"Corey," I said, "that ass thinks we wrecked his car. He's losing the little bit of brains he had."

Corey looked concerned. "He's in trouble, Angie," she said. "He's getting a hard time from his enemies, but he'll never learn. He wants to pull us down with him because misery loves company."

"I don't even want to hear about it," I stormed, going into the kitchen to make supper. "I want that man out of my life for good. And I don't want to see those stupid women in here again, do you hear me?" I was getting really pissed off at Corey, since her low-life friends were the link that led Phil back to me. I was giving her lots of space in bed at night, and I'm sure that was partly why she looked so down, but I couldn't help the way I felt. I made up my mind that if I lost Gail, Corey and I would be through.

We had a quiet meal, then I did some mending while Gail and I watched TV. I heard Corey on the upstairs phone, so I went into the hall and listened.

"Friday night, girl," she was saying. "Yeah, I don't usually, but I figured what the hey. He's got some good stuff. Well, no," she laughed, "it'll never be as cheap as it was then. Everything goes up. See you." I was sick and tired of hearing Corey and her friends giggling like teenagers over "good stuff." If the life we had together before Phil came back wasn't good stuff, I didn't know what was.

She was making another phone call, and I wanted to hear every word. "No, man, it really wasn't us," she was telling someone. "It was them, but they don't think I know. Listen, they're coming to my place Friday and they want to score off you. Look," she said, lowering her voice, "if you really want the kid —" She snickered. "Oh, you don't. You do. Well, in the meanwhile they'll be here. Try to act as if you don't know, then you can pay them back later. 'Cause I have a little score to settle with Bill and Les too, you know. Hell no, it's not true. Some people might think I am, but I like men as much as the next woman. Same goes for Angie. Well, I don't really think that's your business, but if you want to know, you better ask her. No, she'll be out. See you."

Corey can sound like a juvenile delinquent when she wants to, which is probably how she sounded as a teenager from a rough part of Regina. Rough by Moose Jaw standards, anyway, and that's what I go by. I thought, she can be so good at relating to people, but then she acts like one of those wild seeds she counsels at the girls' centre.

I could forgive Corey a lot because of her good heart, but I had to draw the line when my child's welfare was at stake. I knew Corey loved Gail too, but she didn't

seem to know how much danger she put us in by hanging onto her friends from the wrong side of town. In spite of everything, I still loved old Corinne.

She made one more phone call that night, and it was short. "Ed?" she asked a little tensely. "If you want him, you got him. My place, Friday night. With some of his customers. Yeah. I thought so. Let's just say I'm a good citizen, helping you do your job. Later." She sighed. I had the feeling that she felt really alone, but so did I. Who was she talking with anyway? And what was this about Friday night at our place? I didn't plan to be home, and I didn't want to be involved. I felt as if part of me was dying.

On Friday morning I woke up feeling sick, but forced myself to go to work. I tried to ignore it, but finally my stomach was so upset that I had to come home early. When Gail and Corey came home, they fussed over me and said I should rest. I wanted Gail to be with me, so she brought her colouring book into my room. I was supposed to go to a union meeting that evening, but it was out of the question. Corey brought my supper up, but I couldn't eat.

I slept off and on until about eleven o'clock that evening. I woke in time to hear Corey quietly opening the door downstairs. Then I heard Phil's voice. After awhile, I heard other voices. Dizzy as I was, I pulled myself out of bed and went to eavesdrop at the head of the stairs.

"It's good stuff, man," I heard Phil saying. "I got it out at the Coast."

"You're still asking a lot," muttered Les. I heard a giggle that sounded like Leona.

Then there were several loud bangs on the front door. I recognized Corey's footsteps going to open it, then some heavier steps in our kitchen. The words "You're under arrest" floated up.

I crawled halfway down the stairs and saw Phil trying to fight off a cop. "Take your hands off me!" he yelled.

Bill was growling. "We never done nothin'! You can't take us in for nothin'!"

"We got the evidence," the other cop said sarcastically. "Come ladies."

Gail called to me over the commotion. "Mum! What's happening? Has my Dad come to take me away?" She sounded scared and sleepy.

I moved to her side. "No, honey," I soothed her. "Some policemen are taking him away. I'll tell you more when I find out." We held each other close and shivered. I rocked my baby back to sleep.

Then I staggered down the stairs and found Corey sitting alone in the kitchen. "Angie," she asked, "are you well enough to be down here?"

"No," I answered, pulling my bathrobe tighter. "But Corinne, I have to know what went on here tonight and who have you been phoning these last few days."

Corey laughed. "All right, old woman. Let me fix you some honey and lemon while we talk." I fidgetted while she put the kettle on.

Corey let out a sigh. "Phil used to sell dope to Bill, Leona, Les, Crystal and that crowd years ago," she told me. "Once he left town, his place was filled by the Coté brothers. They'll sell anything that ain't legal."

"Aren't they Bill's cousins?" I asked.

"They're related, but they don't get along with her that well. They don't approve of her lifestyle. Mostly, they don't like the competition. They're pimps too."

"You mean Leona —" I was stunned.

Corinne nodded. "And Crystal sometimes. Leona just about started the business here. Her name is a legend at the girls' centre. But anyway, when Phil came back to town, Bill and company started dealing with him instead." I shivered so hard my teeth chattered.

"He had the nerve to come here asking for money!" I raged. "His pockets were probably full of it."

"No," said Corey, who seemed to know everything. "Phil was robbed the day before he came to see you. The Cotés were probably behind it. So he was flat broke again." She paused while I slurped my honey and lemon. "But they weren't finished with Phil. The Cotés want to corner the market in dope and prostitution in this town, so they wrecked his car."

"He thought it was us," I said, still mad.

"I told him it was Bill and Les," Corey said calmly. "I made him think I wanted to help him get even with them and make some money at the same time."

"What?" I screeched.

Corey smiled. "He brought two guys with him tonight. They were hiding in the lane to beat up the women after Phil had sold them some dope."

"And I was supposed to sleep through all this?" I demanded.

"You were supposed to be out."

"Oh. Yes," I gulped. "And you tipped off the cops?"

"Yep," Corey grinned. "Ed and I go back a long way. He was glad to get enough evidence on Phil to nail him with a few charges. The old dope peddler won't be giving us any more trouble, and we won't be losing our Gail."

"Uh," I said, resting my head in my hands.

"You should be in bed, honey," my partner said, putting an arm around my shoulders.

"Wait," I said, trying to think. "You trapped your friends into getting busted for possession. Or trafficking." I looked at her. "That's not like you, Corey." She didn't say anything. "I bet they won't be happy with you when they get out," I said.

"Would you?" she asked me. There was some bitterness in her voice.

"You've lost them," I said, thinking out loud. "They were your friends for twenty years, but they'll never forgive you for ratting." I knew those women had meant something to Corey, even though I couldn't feel the same way about them. "You did it for me," I said in wonder.

"Yeah," she said quietly. She smiled sadly. "We all came out together when we were rangy kids, but we've been going down different roads for a long time now. It was bound to happen." I thought about Corey making that decision all alone, while I was telling her I didn't want to hear anything about it. I wasn't proud of myself.

"Where did you learn so much about my ex?" I wanted to know. "And the dope and sex trade in Saskatchewan?"

Corey winked. "Here and there," she said. "From the street. You wouldn't believe the stories we hear in Social Services, especially at the centre. And in the gay

community.'' It crossed my mind that I had never really tried to be part of that community the way Corey was. My common sense told me that not all lesbians could be like Bill and Les and their wives, but I was always scared of what I didn't know. I had hidden from trouble until it came looking for me.

Suddenly I felt really tired. Leaning on Corey, I said, ''Let's go.'' She wrapped an arm around me and we went up the stairs together.

Once we were in bed in the dark, I felt much better. ''Honey,'' I said, ''we should always discuss things. You shouldn't let me shut you up.'' She chuckled, and I pushed myself against her.

''I'll tell you what's on my mind,'' she said, ''if you'll always promise to listen.''

''I will,'' I promised, ''but I have a right to my own opinions.'' I could feel her laugh because she had her arms around me. I knew she wanted to kiss me, but she was holding back because I wasn't well. Tomorrow night, I thought.

I thought of something else. ''Corey, how could I find out more about the trades without making a big commitment? I don't really know much about carpentry and welding and that stuff.''

I knew she would like that question. ''Take the pre-trades course,'' she told me.

''Okay,'' I mumbled, ''I'll see.'' What I wanted to tell her was, don't expect me to become a mechanical whiz overnight, but I'm willing to learn some new things. I felt as if a load had been lifted from my shoulders, and I knew Corey felt the same way. That night, we slept the sleep of the righteous.

Goddesses

The first thing I noticed about Marty was her resemblence to the MacDonald Lassie in the old ads for *Export A* cigarettes. The picture of the pink-faced woman in the plaid cap was in a lot of ads when I moved to Canada with my family in the 1960s. I was a kid then, and I remember thinking that that lady looked even pinker than any white person I had seen in real life. She had the same kind of sanctified glow I used to notice on the picture of Aunt Jemima on sacks of pancake mix in the States. That was when I didn't see anything wrong with Aunt Jemima. She reminded me of my Mom's cousin, Aunt Lee, who showed me how to crochet. I felt as if all the people in ads came from some place where no one was ever poor or funny-looking, and I wanted to go there. When I first saw the MacDonald Lassie on a billboard after we'd crossed the border, I felt as if she was welcoming me into my new country.

That was probably what attracted me to Marty when I saw her at a board meeting of the gay club — she had that Canadian look, though she was doing her best to disguise it. She wore old, tight jeans, and a ripped leather jacket with enough metal on it to make me wonder about her sex life, but she had the face and body of an innocent girl. I thought she was like a turtle or an armadillo that hopes its enemies will never guess what a soft, tender body it has under its hard shell. I decided to try a laid-back approach.

Marty was a member-at-large on the board, and I had just been elected treasurer, so I had a good excuse to talk to her right after the meeting. I figured she wouldn't brush me off if I offered her money, so I told her she could give me any receipts she had and I would pay her back for any expenses she incurred on club business.

I think she liked my style, but I don't think she liked having to look up at me while I talked to her. I tried to slouch a little, but there's not much a woman of 5'10" can do to get down to the level of a woman who wears petite sizes. No matter what anyone says, we're not all created equal.

I found chairs for us, and then she smiled at me. When she pushed up the sleeves of her shirt, I noticed the blue tattoo of a snake circling up her arm. I thought it should have a motto underneath, something like "Don't Mess with the Sting." I wanted to ask her about it, but I thought better of it.

The longer I kept her talking, the friendlier she got. "I don't spend that much on board things," she said, "but I'll let you know. I appreciate it, Pat." After I got her

phone number I decided not to press my luck too much at one time, so I stood up to go.

She suddenly gave me a sweet smile that lit up her pink cheeks. "I work at the Esso on Eighth Avenue," she said, "if you want to drop over sometime."

Sure honey, I thought, I like hanging around where I can breathe in gas fumes. I couldn't resist asking her what she did. "Are you a mechanic?"

She looked pissed off, as if she thought I must be making fun of her. "Naw," she muttered. "I pump gas." Classy profession, I thought, but at least she was not in a feminine job ghetto.

She must have noticed the look on my face. "Where do you work?" she asked. It sounded like a dare.

I knew this would be hard to explain. "I work part-time in the art gallery," I told her, "and I'm taking sculpture classes toward my MFA." That didn't mean anything to her. "Master of Fine Arts," I explained.

She stared at me so openly that I started to feel challenged, then annoyed. I knew that wasn't exactly the go-home-nigger kind of look I still get in some neighbourhoods, but it felt too damn close. "I'd like to sketch you sometime," I said to retaliate, letting her know she interested me as a thing. "In the nude," I added insultingly. "I'm always looking for things to draw — fruit, buildings, thin girls. I like to see the structure underneath." I looked at the top of her head, where I could see a little bit of grey-white scalp under her brush cut.

"I don't pose in the nude," she said in a low voice, but I was already turning away and she could see she was losing any control she might have had.

"Drop in at the art gallery sometime," I said over my shoulder, heading for the door. "There's a good show on now. Magic realists." As if you know what that means, I thought. If Marty said anything more, I didn't hear.

That encounter left me with a slight buzz of anger for the rest of the week, and I poured it into my work. I was already doing some quick sketches for the sculptures I wanted to do for my exhibit, but they all looked like angry women with nappy hair and waving arms. I wanted to do a series of female-looking shapes in bronze or steel. I like shiny metal because it's so eye-catching, like 1950s tail-fins. I guess I'm still a commercial artist at heart.

I was really surprised when Marty came into the art gallery, still wearing her leather jacket. She looked uncomfortable, but I gave her credit for coming in at all. The show that month featured some very urban-looking steel sculptures by some guy from New York. According to the catalogue, he was satirizing our modern, overcrowded, technological, nuclear society, but I'd be willing to bet he was a failed engineer. Satirize my ass. Anyway, Marty didn't really look that out of place in the steel jungle, and I was sort of glad she didn't borrow her mother's pearls to visit an art gallery for the first time, like some people who don't know any better.

She said hello as if she was glad to see me, and I encouraged her to look around. I suddenly understood why Christian missionaries used to go to Africa to convert the heathen — it would be fun to introduce someone to new ideas. It'd be like seducing a virgin.

Marty seemed bewildered by the big steel pieces, and she looked very small. I wondered whether anyone had ever told her that her tough clothes made her look more vulnerable, not less. I didn't really want to change her style, though. Somehow on her, it was just right.

On my way home, I stopped at the Tall Gal store on a whim. I tried on a pair of tight jeans with a real rip-off price, a T-shirt and a fancy leather jacket with studs. It gave me a kick to see myself in the mirror, and I flattered myself that I looked like a big bad dyke. All I needed was a pair of shades and a Harley-Davidson. I could see myself as a bronze statue: Dahomean Warrior in the New World, by Patricia Louise Johnson.

I walked out of the store empty-handed. I couldn't afford the clothes, and the look wasn't me. Even when I spent time doing my hair in cornrows, I looked more like my mother with her hair in plaits for the night than like an African princess. I also have too many curves to look like a bulldagger in men's clothes. I'm not real Amazon material.

When Marty came in to the gallery a second time, I was less surprised. I offered her a cup of coffee and told her I liked her earrings, since they looked like little versions of the steel pieces that had just left. I could see she was wondering if this was some kind of subtle put-down, but she smiled as if to say she was giving me the benefit of the doubt. I asked about her job, and she said she was off her shift. We talked about the next board meeting, not mentioning the word "gay". I told her I was starting to plan my MFA exhibit, even though it was over a year away.

"D'you still need someone to model for you?" she blurted.

It was my turn to stare. I hadn't been serious when I'd asked her, but I was willing to take her up on it. "Yeah," I said. What an easy way to get women out of their clothes, I thought. I should have done this sooner.

She came to my place on a Sunday afternoon, after going to morning mass. I was surprised to hear that she was a devout Catholic who usually took her six-year-old son to church with her. He was being raised by the same foster parents who had raised her. Needless to say, they were hard-working, hard-praying folks who had kicked her out when she was seventeen because they didn't like her drinking or her friends. She had a girlfriend at the time, but she would usually turn to men between relationships with women. That was how she became pregnant at twenty. She wanted to give the baby up for adoption, but her parents convinced her that would be almost as sinful as an abortion. She had been apologizing to God for her son Danny's birth ever since, while showing a brassy face to the world.

I didn't learn all this the first time she sat for me, but it came out little by little. The first time she came over, we didn't talk much. I knew she was nervous about taking her clothes off, so I tried to relax her with music. I found out she wasn't into jazz or soul, but she liked my collection of 1960s rock, and my New Wave stuff. Although I hadn't really planned on doing a detailed study from the life, I enjoyed fooling around on paper and looking at her from different angles. Imagine having the MacDonald Lassie in your front room. The parts of her skin that were normally covered up looked pearly white over her delicate bones. I could see there would always be something girlish about her.

She started coming over about every two weeks, and I looked forward to it. During those weeks, I was at the mercy of the gallery director and my profs, but when Marty came over, I got to call the shots. I had the feeling she needed to enter my space and let go of her defenses as much as I needed to control the mood and make her pose the way I wanted her. This must be what it feels like, I used to think. I wouldn't admit to myself what "it" was.

She got into the habit of telling me true confessions from her life. "When I was in grade six," she told me once, "there was this one coloured — black boy in my class. The kids I hung around with didn't like him, so we beat him up on the way home from school."

"Why?" I asked, trying to stay cool. Ask a silly question.

"Well, you know how it is." At least she was blushing. "I think his parents complained to the school because I remember we had to stay in after class for awhile."

Little pigs, I thought. Just like their redneck parents, with concrete between the ears. And those kids probably thought of what they did as some kind of rebellion against the system, like grownup children dressing up in sheets and calling themselves Grand Dragons. Rites of the tribe.

"Why are you telling me this?" I asked in a voice like stone. That bothered her. I knew why, of course. Everyone wants to be relieved of guilt over something. Maybe she even wanted to be punished, but what she wanted was not my responsibility.

She stuttered for a second. "I know it was wrong," she said. "I wouldn't do that kind of thing now." I dare you to try it, I thought. I let the silence build until I put more music on.

Another time she asked me if I ever got lonely. "Sometimes," I said, "but not enough to grab the first thing that comes along. Whoever wants to be with me will have to understand that I need time for my work."

She wore a poker face. "Well, I don't let anybody tell me how to live either," she pointed out, "but I think being with the right person is a lot more important than work." I was tempted to walk over and touch her right then, since she needed it so much. I wanted to feel her melt in my arms and beg for my attention, my love, my talent, my wisdom. But I also wanted to make her wait, so nothing happened that day.

The next time she came, I asked her what she wanted to do with her life. "Have a good time for a short time," she cracked.

I reminded her that the gay club needed a new bartender, and I advised her to apply. "You've done that before," I said, "and you don't mind serving the unwashed public."

Marty was not pleased. "You can't expect me to work at the gay club," she pointed out, as if I should have known.

My patience was running out. "Have you ever really loved what you were doing? Listen, girl," I said, "you weren't put on this earth to waste your own time or anyone else's. You're fooling yourself if you think anyone besides you really cares what you do. No one else is gonna show you what your life is about, so if you're waiting for someone to lead you to the promised land, you'll be waiting for the rest of

your life." I knew I was hurting her, but I couldn't seem to stop. I'm not really a hard person at all, but she needed some granite.

Like a teenager, she turned sulky. "I work at a job, eh," she told me. "And I don't get to sit around in a nice warm art gallery or play with clay like you do. My kid does that while I'm out earning a living."

I could have slapped her. "You think I have an easy life, don't you?" I asked. "You really do. My advisor in the Master's program just asked me if I'm serious about what I'm doing. I guess he thinks I'm playing with clay too. I got my first degree almost completely on scholarships, girl, and I worked as a commercial artist for two years, but he wants to know if I'm serious. Do you know why, honey? The white boys who want to screw the model in art class don't get asked if they're serious. They're not making nigger art, or women's art, or dyke art."

Marty looked paler than usual, but it probably wasn't just from my words. She could probably tell I was liable to hit something — I must have had some flashes of red in my aura.

I find that one of the most interesting things about relating to another person is finding out who I can be in that relationship. With Marty, I could let out some of the anger I couldn't even let myself feel most of the time. Or I could tease her in various ways, while teasing myself. I could act amazingly butch, and that was not even my nature.

"Does your advisor know you're gay?" she asked, looking shocked.

"I bet he suspects," I said. "I don't go out of my way to hide it." I laughed. "Do you think the people you work with haven't figured you out?" I walked over and held her head so I could kiss her.

She hesitated for a minute, then leaned into the kiss as if she'd been waiting for it a long time. Her hunger was even deeper than I'd guessed, and it moved me. She was so soft and trusting, as if she had never learned how dangerous that was. I led her into my bedroom, where we finally held each other for as long as we wanted.

I wanted to spend more time with Marty after that, but other things in my life interfered. I went to see a marvellous exhibit of African art at another gallery, and that helped me focus my ideas for my own show. I started reading about African goddesses: Afrekete, Yemaya, Oshun. I wanted to make some masks. I dreamed about women with wings, women with horns, women with weapons, gourds, mirrors and the tools of their trades. In lighter moment, I dreamed up new logos for products in the supermarket — Yemaya brand tuna, Afrekete frozen okra, Sister Oya Deep Woods Air Freshener. I doodled a few of these on paper while I was on the phone or in the bathroom.

When Marty came over, we argued. "If nobody takes you seriously as an artist," she said, "why do it?"

I was sarcastic. "What do you want me to do, clean peoples' houses?"

"Well, you had an art job," she said. "Why did you give it up?"

This was one of my sorest points, and I had hoped she wouldn't open that can of worms. "I was pushed out, Marty," I told her. "Do you know what it's like when other people always take credit for your work? Not to mention that you can't get paid for your talent unless you're putting out for some white bigshot in the agency."

Marty stared at me as if she hadn't known I could be treated like a coloured woman. Then she looked down, sighed, and slapped my shoulder. "Well, Pat," she said, "that's how it is most places, I guess. Men are always men, and they don't really want women to work for money. My Dad wouldn't let my Mum work until he was laid off." I noticed that Marty discussed every social issue in terms of her parents, though she always pointed out that she hadn't lived in their house for years.

We argued about how to deal with family, and we argued about religion. We argued about feminism (she thought it wouldn't change anything since men are men), we argued about racism (she thought it was natural, though wrong), we argued about marriage and motherhood (she thought they were both beautiful sacraments, but not for her), and we argued about prostitution (she thought those women were just plain lazy). We argued about cultural differences. Most of all, we argued about work. I called her an ignorant cavewoman a few times, and she called me a crazy artist and an educated fool. And all the time our bodies would be calling to each other until we ended the argument in bed. It was a very strange relationship, but it had its own rhythm.

After I told her I wanted some scrap metal to try out some of my ideas, she brought me bent fenders and other spare parts from cars. My first experiments in the sculpture studio were frustrating. Welding wasn't one of my strong points, so the first time I tried joining two pieces of steel I had too much oxygen in the torch and burned holes in the weld. I was trying to make an ancestor mask, but that ancestor was not meant to live again. Stay cool, I told myself. I bet my fellow slaves in the studio didn't know the tall dark woman with the oxyacetylene torch was a pervert with a fetish.

Eventually I finished my classes and got permission to do my exhibit on a theme of goddess imagery. There was a lot of talk going around about the women's studies program to be set up the next year, and I suppose Visual Arts wanted to be on the cutting edge of a hip new thing. Me too. I'm so sharp I could call myself the sacred blade.

I saw Marty whenever I could, and I kept learning new things about her. When I went to her apartment for the first time, I was surprised to notice her fur coat and a big TV with a built-in stereo. When I mentioned them, she couldn't resist bragging. "I got that stuff wholesale," she said. I raised an eyebrow and she winked. "You know the Devil's Disciples?"

"The motorcycle gang?" I asked. "You hang out with them?"

"I used to know some of them," she said, "when I was going with Cindy Wheeler. They could get us things."

"So they're hot," I said. "Stolen merchandise. Real smart of you, Marty. Do you know you could be charged along with whoever sold you that stuff?"

She looked like a bad kid playing hooky. "I never got caught," she told me, snickering.

Marty not only had ways of getting the things she wanted, she knew how to fix them. When my vacuum cleaner wouldn't work, she told me she'd had the same problem with hers, and fixed mine with a pair of pliers. She did minor repairs on her bike and even her car. She wanted me to be impressed, and I was. However, I wasn't willing to stop calling her a barbarian until she started thinking about her connection

with the rest of the world. I had to convince her there is something called an "examined life."

I didn't see Marty at all for a month before my exhibit opened. I had to eat, sleep and breathe fire and metal to get my pieces done on time.

My first goddess was Oya, a copper mask attached to a steel body in sail-like shapes to suggest wind and motion. When the light hit her, she flashed like lightning. She was about six feet high. After that I felt confident enough to work with acrylic, since I wanted a transparent material in my Yemaya. I made her with bronze. She looked like a mermaid, with acrylic spheres set into her tail.

I was working on my bronze Oshun-Erzulie when people started hanging around to watch. I didn't really need an audience, but was glad when my show got a big write-up in the school paper. I suppose it was tokenism, but a token can buy you a ride to go where you want to go.

I was very pleased with Erzulie. I set a lace fan into one of her wire hands and decked her out with earrings and necklaces made of wooden beads, feathers and shells. I loved that prima donna, though she tried to upstage all her sisters. While working on her, I had the strange feeling of being loved back.

I wanted to make a steel Pombagira with a matte surface, even though she was never really an African goddess. She's worshipped in Brazil as a variation of the trickster god Papa Legba, or Eshu, and she lives at the crossroads. I gave her a squared-off shape, with stylized arms and legs at right angles. I had more trouble welding that piece than I did with any of the others. I guess the joke was on me.

For Ibeji, the Twins, I made one bronze sculpture with some brass parts, and set up a mirror behind it to create the image of a perfect double. I also liked the way the mirror reflected light.

Obatala, the sky goddess, was the last piece. She had a steel body that I polished to a shine, with copper coating on the head. Her wings and posture were meant to suggest Winged Victory. I'd always had a feeling that Greek and African mythology were connected. What I produce is never exactly the same as the image in my head, but I finally reached a point where I was fairly satisfied.

My opening night was a gas. Marty was there, at my insistence. She was wearing a fake-silk shirt with some grey wool pants I liked, and she looked like a little fashion model. I introduced her to the gallery staff, the art faculty and my fellow students. I noticed how the men looked at her, but I thought what the heck — this is a display of beautiful things. You're welcome to look, boys, but don't touch.

A photographer from the newspaper got some good shots of me in my white caftan with my goddesses, shining under the lights. My pieces filled the space, even though the student room in the gallery was quite big.

I was surprised to see several people I didn't expect to be there, including the woman from Trinidad in the Federation of Canadian Professional Women, Effie Duvil or Duval. She never had two words for me before, but now she told me she loved my sculptures. The goddesses must be creating sisterhood, I thought. Maybe I should carry a lucky piece of scrap steel in my pocket.

When we finally left, I noticed that Marty was drunk and feeling sorry for herself. "I hope you don't think I was ignoring you," I said in the car, "but I had to pay some attention to other people."

"Sure, fine," she muttered. "You had to let all your fans kiss your ass."

I was getting seriously annoyed. "What the hell do you want, Marty?" I asked. "You knew what to expect."

She was silent for a few minutes. "Why did you draw all those sketches of me?" she burst out. "You didn't use them. Those metal things don't look like anybody." So she had hoped to see herself in my work. She wanted to be a sculptor's Muse, the model for a marble statue of Venus. She had given herself to me the way women used to give themselves to male artists who promised to love them and make their beauty last forever. Now she was disappointed, the way dependent women have always been disappointed.

We got out of the car in silence. I unlocked the front door of my building and stepped aside to let Marty go up the stairs ahead of me. When we got into my apartment, I lit the red candles on my kitchen table. Red for love. "Honey," I said, "I didn't mean to let you down."

"Yeah," she said, slumping into a chair. Her posture didn't really go with her outfit.

"Marty," I said, "haven't you ever made anything? Some things have a life of their own. Blame it on the loas," I laughed. "They've been around me for years, though I didn't know it. Anyhow, you were involved in my work too, you know."

"It's okay, Pat," she said sullenly. "I guess I just don't understand artists."

As men say, the chick was a challenge. She seemed to be giving off sparks to protect herself from surrendering. Looking at her rebellious little body, I wondered whether junkies crave their fix the way I craved the feeling I could get from her, the satisfaction of knowing she wanted me.

I slid my arms around her shoulders. I could feel her tense up, then relax halfway. "I don't know how to draw," she muttered, sinking into self-pity, "or make anything artistic. I suppose now you'll be famous."

I laughed and kissed the side of her neck. "I'm not famous yet," I told her, "but wouldn't you like that?" I pulled her up out of her chair. Her arms went around my back as usual, and she leaned up against my breasts. "Wouldn't that be more of a thrill?" I asked in her ear.

Marty laughed too, and then I knew she wouldn't resist. We swayed together for a minute, and I leaned over to blow out the candles. We staggered into the bedroom like two old drunks in the dark, but we pleased each other as well as ever.

Things happened fairly fast for both of us after that. I was hired as a sessional to teach first year art for one term, but then the Secord Commission wanted me to do some contract work on the Famous Canadian Women series. It was nothing big, but it was a start and I took it. Later I found out the Federation of Professional Women had sent a letter to the hiring committee.

Marty told me in June that she'd been accepted to start an auto mechanic's course in September, though that meant moving to another town, since it was too far

to commute. She was getting some help from Canada Employment, though she also received a student loan. "I'll miss you," she said when she told me.

"We'll still see each other when you're in town, honey," I said sadly. "I'll be here." I wanted her to know I wouldn't turn her away even if I get rich and famous. Of course, she'll have to take her turn.

"I'm getting money because I'm in non-traditional training," Marty told me. "That's what they call it." She looked guilty and resentful. "My parents don't like what I'm doing. They don't think it's right for a girl — woman. My Dad is the one who showed me how to fix things in the first place."

"Don't give me no bad news!" I thought. "You have to be non-traditional if you want to get anywhere. It's you. And don't worry about Danny. I'm sure they'll look after him. Anyway, it's out of your hands."

I suddenly thought of something. "Marty," I said, "I made you an ad." I flipped through my sketchbook and pulled out my sketch of her with little wings on her back, holding an oil can. It was my logo for Joan the Conquerer motor oil, guaranteed to take you farther. I could see how tickled she was because she turned several shades pinker. Comparing her and my sketch, I thought it would look good as a transfer on a T-shirt over her little chest.

I thought of something else. "When did you apply to get in?"

She chuckled. "A while ago. I didn't want to tell you until I knew." She looked proud. I realized she had made plans on her own, without giving me the slightest hint. Or I hadn't picked up on it. Well, I thought, she survived on the street long before I met her. So why do I mind finding out she doesn't really need me?

Yet I liked the idea that she had picked up something from me. "Once you graduate," I told her, "you could open a garage and give me some spare space for my sculpture studio. Near my ad agency."

"Whatever," she laughed. "If — when I get my papers." I wished her strength rather than emotional need, though I could see how the two things could go together. Catching a glimpse of Damballah the snake on her arm, I had a feeling our lives would twine in and out of each other for years to come.

Sisters

There is a dark secret at the heart of my family, but it's not what you would expect. My father is a respected professor at the university, and you could search in vain for signs that he has ever abused his wife or two daughters in any physical way. Debbie and I, the grown children, have a long history of shocking, addictive, incestuous violence. She has threatened me with knives; I've thrown her on the floor and kicked her. We don't approve of such behaviour, and we never plan it. It's something we never discuss at the dinner table.

I heard about Debbie's homecoming when I dropped in on our parents with my son Isaac, who was about a year old then. Our mother told me that the prodigal daughter was finally returning from her travels abroad, which included a year on a kibbutz in Israel. Deb had written to say that she would gladden our parents' hearts by living at home and going to the university where I hoped to get hired as an instructor in September. Oy vey.

Debbie would resent hearing me describe her as my younger sister, but I don't know how to explain our connection any other way. She would also resent hearing herself described as thinner, though she had always been a string bean. She looked enough like me to make the comparison apt, or perhaps I look like a darker and heavier version of Deb. She was a pale, thin streak of energy that bounced restlessly around a room, around the world. She could hold two or more jobs while saving for the things she wanted: travel, a stereo, a guitar, a motorcycle. She surrounded herself with friends, and although she asserted her opinions against all opposition, she was always defending her right to take up space, because she felt that I'd been trying to crowd her out of the light ever since I was born seven years earlier. Ours was not the sisterhood of modern feminism. Ours was the tribal sisterhood of Leah and Rachel.

"You don't know what it's like," Debbie told our mother and me at the kitchen table. She was wearing a long loose black cotton dress fastened with dozens of little buttons. Tied carelessly around her neck was some kind of a Bedouin scarf with little coins on it. The outfit made her look even more svelte and dramatic than usual, and it brought out the golden highlights in her floating shoulder-length hair. She lit a cigarette. "Israeli men are sexist enough," she said, blowing smoke, "especially the Sabras, but Arabs are worse. It's that Muslim culture. You just wouldn't survive in

the Middle East, Miriam. No offense, but I know you." She thought she was Deborah the prophet. And of course she couldn't imagine me surviving, because she thought women my age were either too weak to defend themselves or too reckless to stay out of dangerous situations or too stupid to think of the right move at the right moment. The heroines of her stories were young women with chutzpah, who always landed on their feet.

Ike was toddling toward his aunty. "They're like little drunks," laughed our mother, "when they first learn to walk."

"Isaac, Isaac," sighed Deb dramatically, sweeping him into her arms. "My favourite nephew." She had written to tell me how excited she had been when she had received a telegram in Dijon, France, informing her that she was an aunt. She had left for the kibbutz soon after that.

Ike squawked like a bird and struggled out of her arms. "Deb!" he said, looking smug. Talking was his latest accomplishment. He patted her lap hard.

"Don't hit Aunty Debbie," I told him, grabbing his hand. Leave it to me, I thought. I couldn't help wondering what truce or conspiracy or rivalry or pseudo-parental relationship my sister would develop with my son. Did Deb blame me for beating her to the state of motherhood, and did she want to get my little man into an alliance of Young Rebels against our parents and me, the Old Guard? What vicious child-taming practices would my sister accuse me of? At this point, I could only guess.

Deb flicked ashes off her dress. "Do you ever see his father?" she asked casually. She was wearing a condescending look that told me I had done something stupid, as usual, which she would never do. I felt my temperature beginning to rise.

"No," I said cautiously. I was sure I had told her in a letter that I had conceived by artificial insemination; letters are safer than conversations. But maybe I didn't tell her, or maybe she chose to forget. "The father isn't involved," I told her, measuring my words. "We agreed to that."

"Oh," she groaned, smirking. "You agreed. I won't even ask whether he sends money."

Our mother could smell blood, and she looked worried. "We want to hear about the kibbutz, Deborah," she said urgently. "What kind of work did you do there?"

Deb stretched languidly. "I picked fruit for awhile. That was hard, but I liked being out in the orchard. Then I worked in the kitchen. That was interesting, but I thought I would roast to death." She took a long drag on her cigarette. "The older couples were really conservative, you know, really orthodox and the men all had middle-aged paunches and the women were obsessed with their children, but most of the volunteers were young and progressive, left-wing. Most of them were university students from all over Europe and North America." So that's what convinced you that it's trendy to get an education, I thought. I should have known she didn't pick that up from me.

"Remember Paul from New York?" She was referring to one of the young men she had described in letters. I didn't feel it necessary to answer, since she was bound to tell her story anyway. "He's bisexual, but we got so involved that he even asked me to marry him. I know he was serious, but I couldn't see myself meeting his

parents, getting married under a canopy and having babies and all that.'' Of course, I thought, only idiots have babies. Deb flashed a snapshot, showing an earnest-looking youth with glasses and a new, tender growth of dark-brown beard against white skin. My son might grow up to look like that.

''We started using something,'' Deb was saying, ''but by then it was too late.'' A jolt of understanding passed through my centre, from my clitoris to the crown of my head. Our mother looked alarmed. ''I got pregnant. It was an accident. At first I thought I was a late developer. I was growing breasts.'' She tried to laugh and didn't succeed. She couldn't look at us. ''I finally got an abortion when I was almost three months along.''

Our mother gasped loudly. ''Deborah,'' she said, clutching her daughter's arm. ''Was it done by a qualified doctor?''

Deb rolled the ash of her cigarette carefully against the rim of the ashtray. Her hands were shaking. ''Oh, yes. Don't worry, Mom. He worked in a clinic with sterilized equipment and everything. But you know how I am with anesthetics. It didn't take the first time and I woke up while he was scraping — '' She blew smoke. ''I started screaming from the pain, so I had to have a general anesthetic. You wouldn't believe how much blood I lost.''

''I'd believe it,'' I said before our mother could shower sympathy. ''I bled for six weeks after having Isaac.'' I thought of something. ''When did this happen?''

''I had the abortion six months ago,'' Deb said, not willing to let go of her story until she had received her share of sympathy and admiration. I could have guessed, I thought. After getting my news, she went straight to the kibbutz and found a boyfriend to play with.

You even dressed in black, I thought, to tell us your story. Is it because you're in mourning, or because you feel like a black sheep? I visualized some international headlines:

> YOUNGER DAUGHTER OF PROFESSOR DIES IN BANGKOK FROM BACKSTREET ABORTION
>
> CANADIAN ZIONIST DRUG-RUNNER GIVES BIRTH IN MEXICAN PRISON
>
> ''GIVING BABIES UP FOR ADOPTION IS A REVOLUTIONARY ACT,'' SAYS DEBBIE THE RED AFTER HAVING TWINS

Was I being fair? No. She had never been fair to me either.

''Debbie,'' I asked her, ''Do you know how developed a three-month-old foetus is? It has all its parts. Eyes, fingernails, internal organs, nervous system, skeleton, brain, hair, everything it needs. After that, it only needs to grow bigger. And the wall between the two sides of the heart needs to seal up just before birth. Did you see what they took out of you?''

''Miriam!'' yelped our horrified mother, her eyes wide.

Deb stared at me in shock, then in hurt, then in rage. ''What did you expect me to do, Miriam,'' she spat, ''have a baby and raise it on the kibbutz? Or marry Paul and

end up divorced? Or bring the baby home for our parents to raise, like you? Would you want me to be that irresponsible? I don't expect other people to pay for my mistakes, and I know I'm not ready for that kind of commitment. I'm not sure I'll ever have children. There are too many interesting things I want to do."

Isaac seemed to sense his aunt's mood. He ran from his pile of toys in the front room into the kitchen, clutching a fluffy toy dog in one arm and a plastic car in the other. "Deb!" he beamed at her.

My sister, on the brink of tears, scooped him into her arms as though the two of them were the only surviving members of our family. I could see the alliance forming, and I felt strangely satisfied. "You're a good boy," she whispered. To the rest of the room she said, "This child is so beautiful that I would never want to bring an unwanted baby into the world to be deprived. I think all children should be loved." She was gathering steam. "I'm not one of these women who believe in having children they can't afford to raise. I take responsibility for my own decisions."

"Deborah," I said, "I wasn't saying you should have had the baby. I think you did the most sensible thing, I really do. I just want you to realize what you did."

Deb's face clenched. "Do you really think I don't know what an abortion is?" Her voice was shrill.

Our mother wrung her hands, giving each of us a pleading look. "Girls," she said, "that's enough. Deborah, your sister didn't mean any harm. Miriam, Deb has gone through enough and it's over now so there's no point — "

Deb ignored her and yelled into my face: "Have you ever had your insides scraped out with a sharp instrument? If I deserved to be punished, what about Paul? He told me his method was really safe, but he's not the one who got pregnant. Men don't give a damn. Why should they? And some women are stupid enough to go along with whatever men want them to do, just because it's easier that way and they think they'll be taken care of. Well, not me. I have my own life to live." She stabbed out her cigarette and angrily lit another. For a moment, I was afraid she would throw the lit match in my lap.

"Fine," I said, trying to keep my voice low. "Live your own life. Who's stopping you? But don't come here asking me for sympathy when you've never given me any."

"Sympathy!" she sneered. "Why do you need it? Because you're still afraid to strike out on your own and the only men you can find are turds who get you pregnant and run away? You're over thirty and you've never done anything. Are you still living with your friend what's-her-name?"

I wanted to grab her by the throat, but held onto the table instead. "Yes, I'm still living with Barbara because she's the woman I love, stupid! Why do you think we agreed to raise a child together? Why couldn't you ever see what's in front of your face?"

Deb glanced at our mother in shock and realized that our parents had known about me for a long time. Only Debbie, the baby, had been protected from the truth, as usual, while the rest of us had had discussions behind her back. This knowledge drove her wild. She opened her mouth.

"Do you ever think about anyone but yourself?" I interrupted. "Have you wondered how I feel? All your life you've had an audience." My voice was rising. "And you still expect me to give you a hug and try to make it better every time you fall down and hurt yourself, but all I get from you is a slap in the face — "

My sister was wreathed in agitated smoke. "I've never asked you for anything!" she shrieked. "You're the reason I had to get the hell out of here! You think you're such hot shit! If I had never left home you'd still be telling me what to do, and you can't even run your own life!"

As though from a distance, I watched my own arm rise through the air. I slapped Deb with all my strength, and she jerked back. Her soft hair went flying.

"Mommy!" screamed my son. "Don't hit! Don't hit!" He had heard that message from Barbara and me often enough.

Deb lunged forward in a blind rage, but our mother threw herself between us. "Stop it! Stop it!" she begged, almost in tears. "What's the matter with you? Ever since you were children. When will we have peace in this house?" From the corner of my eye, I could see our father glowering in the doorway.

"Come on, Isaac," I said, reaching for him. "We have to go."

Our mother took this as a rejection of her peacemaking efforts. "At least stay for lunch!" she complained. "You don't have to leave yet. Your sister just got home and she has so much to tell." Insanity, I thought, thy name is Mother.

"No, Mama," I tried to say gently but firmly. "We really have to go home now."

I managed to keep a poker face until we got home to Barb, who read me like a book. Relief flooded me when I saw her tall form on the lawn as I pulled into the driveway. The sunlight brought out the colours of Barb's blue pants, grey sweater and sandy-blonde hair. She looked cool and sensible, so different from the emotional young woman in black I had just left. "Not again?" was her greeting.

"Damn it!" I burst out, handing Isaac to Barb and beginning to cry. "Why every time?" I babbled. "That bitch! What does she want from me?" Barb tried to hold me and Isaac at the same time until I began to laugh.

"You don't have to go there," Barb murmured, "if it's that bad. Or go but don't stay long. Family life is no joke."

Barb carried our son into the house while I trailed behind, watching him in despair. He was giving her a sleepy smile. His childlike trust seemed simple — he allowed us to change his diaper, give him his bottle and put him down for his nap. But would he hate us in years to come? Would he come home from school with a dread of "lezzies" and "fags" and would I beat him like a wicked stepmother? Would his Aunt Deborah report me to the police, the Department of Social Services and the newspapers? I refused to imagine more headlines.

I was still tense with worry when our best male friends, Ted and Brian, came over with brandy to go with our after-dinner coffee. Isaac was already in bed, but Barb and I always hoped that the presence of gentle men in our house would somehow influence our son even when he was sleeping; we called Ted and Brian the Fairy Godfathers. God knows Isaac wasn't likely to learn love and patience from me.

We talked about my relationship with my sister, since it was clear to all that I couldn't keep my mind on anything else. Brian and Ted both echoed Barbara. "Can't you just stay away from your parents' house when you know she's there?" asked Ted.

"Or refuse to get involved?" asked Brian. Very funny, I thought. Very simple. How little you understand.

"She's hard to ignore, isn't she?" Barbara asked.

"Yeah," I muttered.

Brian caught on. "It sounds as if you still care for her."

"She admires you," said Barb. "That's why she competes with you."

"When we were kids," I told my companions between gritted teeth, "she used to follow me around, bugging me. 'Miriam, tell me a story! What are you doing? I'm telling! Give me some!' But she was too proud to let me protect her from bullies at school, because she didn't want anyone to think she couldn't fight her own battles. And she paid me to make her a dress when she was sixteen, because she thought I was a good seamstress and she wanted to be a woman who paid her own way. She thinks she's the Wandering Jew, an outcast from society. But now she wants to follow in my footsteps by living at home and taking art. She drives me berserk."

Ted chuckled. "Why not write her a letter?" he suggested. "You don't have to send it, but you might feel better if you write down everything you want to say to her."

That night, after the men had gone home and my mate had gone to bed, I sat up late, thinking. I had an imaginary conversation with Debbie. "So sister, do you have some idea what you want out of life?" I asked her.

"Of course," she answered. "I'm not confused like you. I'm going to take some courses, travel some more, maybe set up a small business or two. Open a restaurant, something like that. Then I'll settle down in a challenging profession and find someone who will never break my heart."

"How will you find and attract this paragon?"

"I have good judgment and good instincts, Miriam. I'm not like you."

"So you say. Will your lover be male or female? Jewish or otherwise? From what country? Forgive my curiosity. I'm eager to learn from the resident sage."

The Debbie in my imagination grew furious, despite being unreal. "That's just like you, Miriam!" she yelled. "What a stupid attitude! You've got such a fucking small, conservative mind! No wonder you'll never get anywhere when all you can do is run other people down and ask bitchy questions!"

"Excuse me," I said. "I should have known you would be a great success at life in general and find a generic human being to love."

In spite of my exhaustion, I began writing:

> Dear Deborah, my only sister in the world,
>
> You probably don't remember your own childhood the way I do, but believe me, you were always a special person. Our parents

probably favoured me because I was the firstborn, but that doesn't mean you were an irrelevant afterthought. Do you think I would have had a child of my own if I hadn't loved you when we were growing up? I wanted to protect you from all harm, even though that isn't possible. I never wanted to be a threat to you. When you see me that way, I get the urge to fulfill your expectations.

We both call ourselves feminists (yes I know you don't believe I fit that label) but what does that mean if we each hate the only woman we can call 'sister' in the most literal sense? I don't want to hurt you, but how else do you expect me to react when you constantly sneer, criticize and try to one-up me?

Debbie, I've known for a long time that neither of us could lead a conventional life and be the nice girl we were each raised to be. If the demon Lilith presided over your birth, she was there for mine first. Our parents love both of us, but it seems we were born to break their hearts by stepping off the traditional path of feminine self-sacrifice. Not that our father believes our mom ever gave up anything for him; on the contrary. I think both our parents believe that a certain level of disappointment in marriage — and in life — is necessary to the maintenance of a kosher home, and I know they believe they are doing the right thing by suffering in silence over their uncontrollable daughters. I think the silence is killing us all.

I can't believe that you've never guessed why all my closest friends have been women. Why do you always accuse me of being the spineless dupe of worthless men? If you do it to prevent me from telling you the truth about my life, you've succeeded. If you do it to build up your own ego, you've obviously failed, since you can never put me down enough to feel safe yourself. If you do it because of that incident with Rod Harley when I was fifteen, I was not responsible for the way he treated me, and I am not responsible for what you believe. When a boy forces himself on a girl, that is rape regardless of the circumstances, and I'm only sorry he was never charged. I'm also sorry I told you. You can't imagine how you hurt me by insisting that no one could do that to me without my consent. I notice you don't apply that rule to yourself or the women you like.

I've known for years that I am a woman who loves women, and I can't pretend this has nothing to do with you. I might have turned out this way even if you didn't exist, but you do exist, along with the other female people who influenced me when I was growing up. I feel very lucky that I finally found a good woman who could love me back. If you feel threatened by my relationship with Barbara, I can't help you. We are who we are.

I'm glad you seem to love your nephew. Like you, he was born into a difficult situation, and he will need all the love he can get. But if you ever try to turn him against me, so help me Goddess, I will break your bones. (I later crossed out this sentence.)

In some cultures, in some religions, they use dolls for some very serious purposes. You should know about that. For every baby dead at birth, for every miscarriage and every other half-assed possibility that could not be brought to term, the mourner dresses a doll in the colour she associates with grief, and buries it with due ceremony. The mourner lights incense or a candle or the weed of her choice and lets her regrets waft away on the smoke. She says some suitable words to each doll, like this:

My niece or nephew, hail and farewell. May you find a place in the world someday, and may the womb you came from recover completely.

My phantom brother, you've haunted our family long enough. Leave my sister and me to develop our own strength without seeking it in men. Leave my son to become himself.

My shame and guilt over other people's treatment of me, I disown you. I refuse to carry anyone else's emotional garbage.

Deb's image of me, may you shrink down to my actual size and stop being the monster shadow at her back.

My memories of my baby sister, may you vanish back into the past where you belong, and stop forming false images between me and the woman Deb has become.

If all these dolls were laid to rest, Deb, we might be able to see each other clearly. If they can't be laid to rest, I hope we both have the courage to bury our hopes of ever accepting each other. If it's absolutely necessary for us to communicate, we can do it through our parents while they live, and through lawyers after their deaths.

We were lucky to be born into the generation between the gas ovens and the (possible) nuclear holocaust to come. While we're alive, and while we both have the urge to create new life in spite of everything, let's not burn up with our own rage.

Love,

Miriam

Ted was wrong. Writing this letter wasn't enough to relieve my feelings. I had a knot in my stomach for three days afterwards, and nothing Barbara could say to me made it go away. I realized that my relief would come, if ever, when I had mailed the letter to the party for whom it was intended. On Barb's advice, I added this postscript:

> If you are still on speaking terms with me, Barbara and I would like to invite you over for dinner. We'll wait to hear from you to decide on the time.

I mailed the letter to Deb at our parents' house and waited. After two weeks had gone by with no word, I decided she wasn't going to answer. Then when I least expected it, she phoned.

"Miriam," she muttered, "can you meet me for coffee in the Arts Building cafeteria tomorrow? I'm free at two-thirty." She probably chose this location because it made up in neutrality for what it lacked in privacy. I accepted her terms.

My sister was not hard to spot. The Bedouin scarf now covered her head, and her jangling, flashing earrings hung almost to her shoulders. She was sitting at a table that appeared to be a gathering place for the New Wave crowd on campus. She agreed to come with me to a more secluded corner.

Deb wouldn't admit to having read and digested my letter, but what else was this about? I waited for her opening shot. "Miriam," she began, staring at a packet of breath mints on the table, "how can you tell if you're a a gay person?" She shook a mint into her hand and avoided my eyes.

"The same way you can tell whether it's time to have a child," I said. "You get a feeling. In a lot of cases, you fall in love with someone. Usually you have to go through a lot of hopeless crushes before something mutual happens. I should know. But even before that, you know you're different. If you try going out with some guy, it feels wrong."

"Um," she acknowledged. "It's dangerous to be that way. Other people can cause trouble."

"Yes."

"Is it worth it?" she asked me.

"Yes," I said simply.

"Some people can go either way," she reminded herself aloud. "Are there some women who can't get along with men but they're not really lesbians?"

"Neither gay nor straight?" I laughed. "I suppose anything's possible. We all have to find out for ourselves what works. But first we have to figure out how we really feel, and that's amazingly hard. I went through a period of thinking I was neither gay nor straight."

Deb looked surprised. "You did?"

"Oh yeah. School was a way out. I was going to be an academic and social activist, and that way I wouldn't have to be sexual. I wouldn't have to feel, or think about who I really loved. It hurt too much."

"Yeah," she admitted. Her eyes were clouded.

"One things that helps," I said quietly, "is remembering that life is short."

Deb gave me a sarcastic look. "Jews and women have an advantage when it comes to that," she said. "We get reminded." We were both silent for a minute, remembering the sight of our own blood.

I suddenly noticed her jittery hands. "Are you trying to stop smoking?" I asked.

"Yes. I want to live as long as possible," she smirked. "Our parents say I can entertain when they go out, so — "

"But they never go out."

Deb looked impatient. "They say they'll go, if only to visit their friends. I'd like to invite you and Barbara over, with Isaac." She seemed to have forgotten our invitation to her. I remembered that my sister is a proud, touchy woman who wants to be a hostess, a giver, an expert, a queen. She would probably cook us something elaborate.

"That would be nice," I smiled. "You have our number." We parted with promises to get together, promises as fragile and dependent on our passing moods as all other commitments, even between people who know each other well. I went home to tell Barbara about the success of Round One.

About the author

Jean Roberta

was born in the United States under Virgo when Mercury was in retrograde. This explains her interest in history and literature, among other things. As a teenager in the 1960s, she moved to Canada with her family, then spent a year in England with them in the 1970s. She has been a Canadian citizen for over 10 years, but holds no patriotic feelings for any governments dominated by men. She was briefly married in her 20s and now lives with her daughter in Saskatchewan.

She has an honours degree in English and is currently revising a thesis for her Masters degree. She has taught composition to university students, English to native adults, and has worked as a freelance tutor and editor. She tends to discuss dangling participles and the uses of the comma unless stopped. She compiles book lists and has an interest in writing by women.

Her poetry and fiction have been published in anthologies of prairie literature. Her work has been described as "extrovert and extravagant in joyous metaphor-making and storytelling" (Craig Tapping in *Canadian Literature*, Winter 1985).

An earlier version of "The Ballad of Marguerite" appeared as "The Ballad of the Deep Blue Sea" in **Dykeversions,** Women's Press, Toronto, 1986.

Her poetry and fiction have appeared in various Canadian and American periodicals such as *Wascana Review, Herizons, Voices, Telewoman, Essence, Herstory, Briarpatch, Network and Freelance.*

She has written articles for magazines, and packages of articles on sexual assault and abuse for different age levels on a government grant. Whenever possible, she sends

money to the charities of her choice: Amnesty International and the Canadian Abortion Rights Action League.

She also likes mountains, forests, old furniture, music, art and dancing.

She looks forward to a long, eccentric life.

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"Now, wrestling on my chesterfield, Maxine slid her hands over my slim body with determination. 'Wait,' I gasped. 'Let me breathe.' I should have known better than to ask her for mercy. No part of me was safe from her reach when she wanted me. Not even my mind or my heart.

"'No,' I said urgently. 'Not yet.' I didn't want to want her. I didn't want to give in to her, to give up my train of thought just when I had seized on a plausible argument for my essay.

"She hesitated for a second, wanting to know what I really meant. While playing the role of a dyke outlaw who rapes the schoolmarm, she was actually very sensitive to my moods. Her fingers searched between my legs, but when she found what she sought, her hand rested calmly on me, waiting."

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